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NOVELET

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

Also

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•

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•

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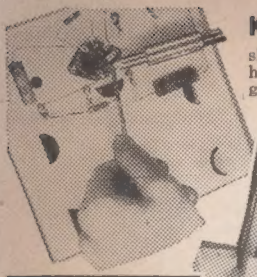

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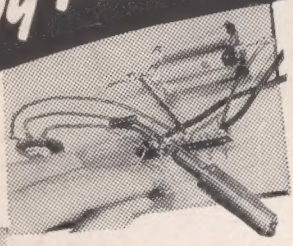

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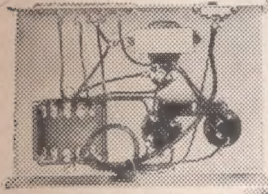

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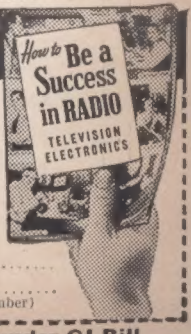

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A Complete Action-Packed Novel

APACHES AT DAWN . . . . . **Frank Carl Young** 4

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SUMMER ISSUE, (March-May) 1948

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

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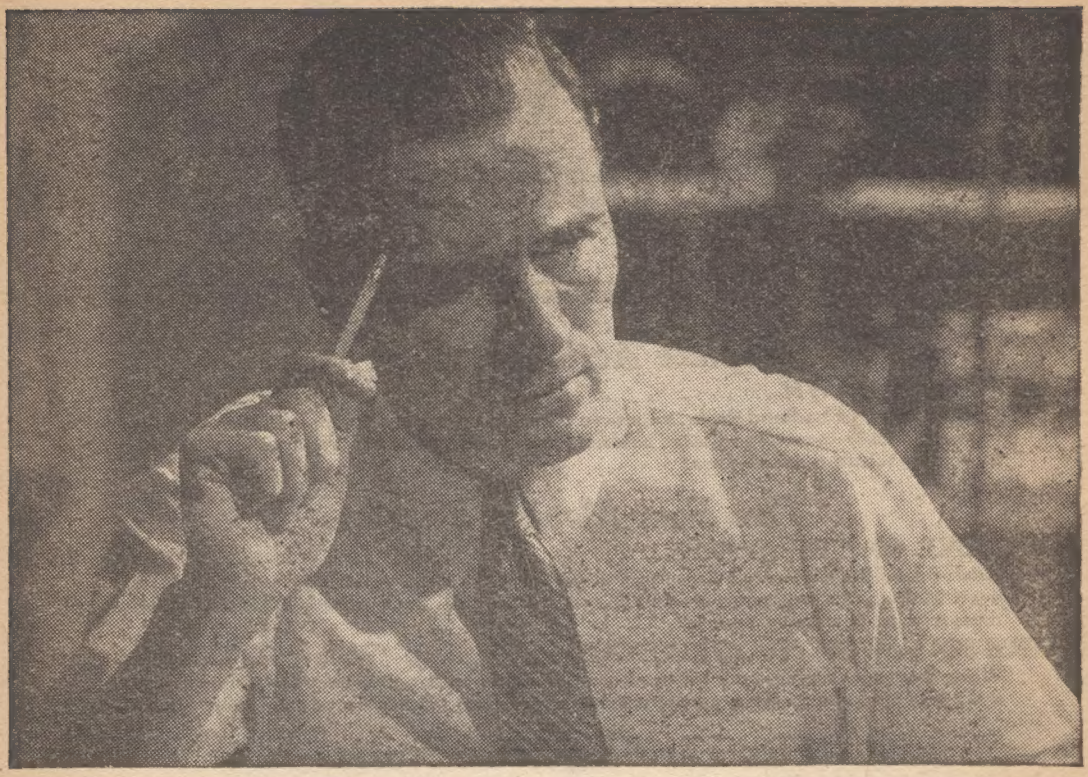

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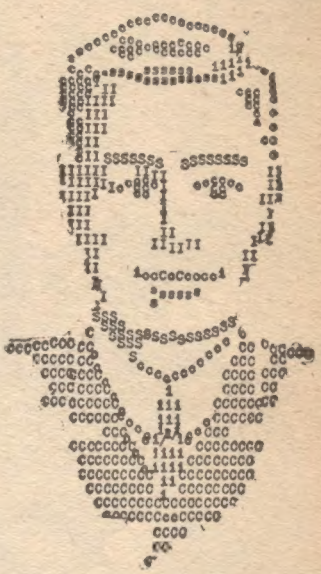

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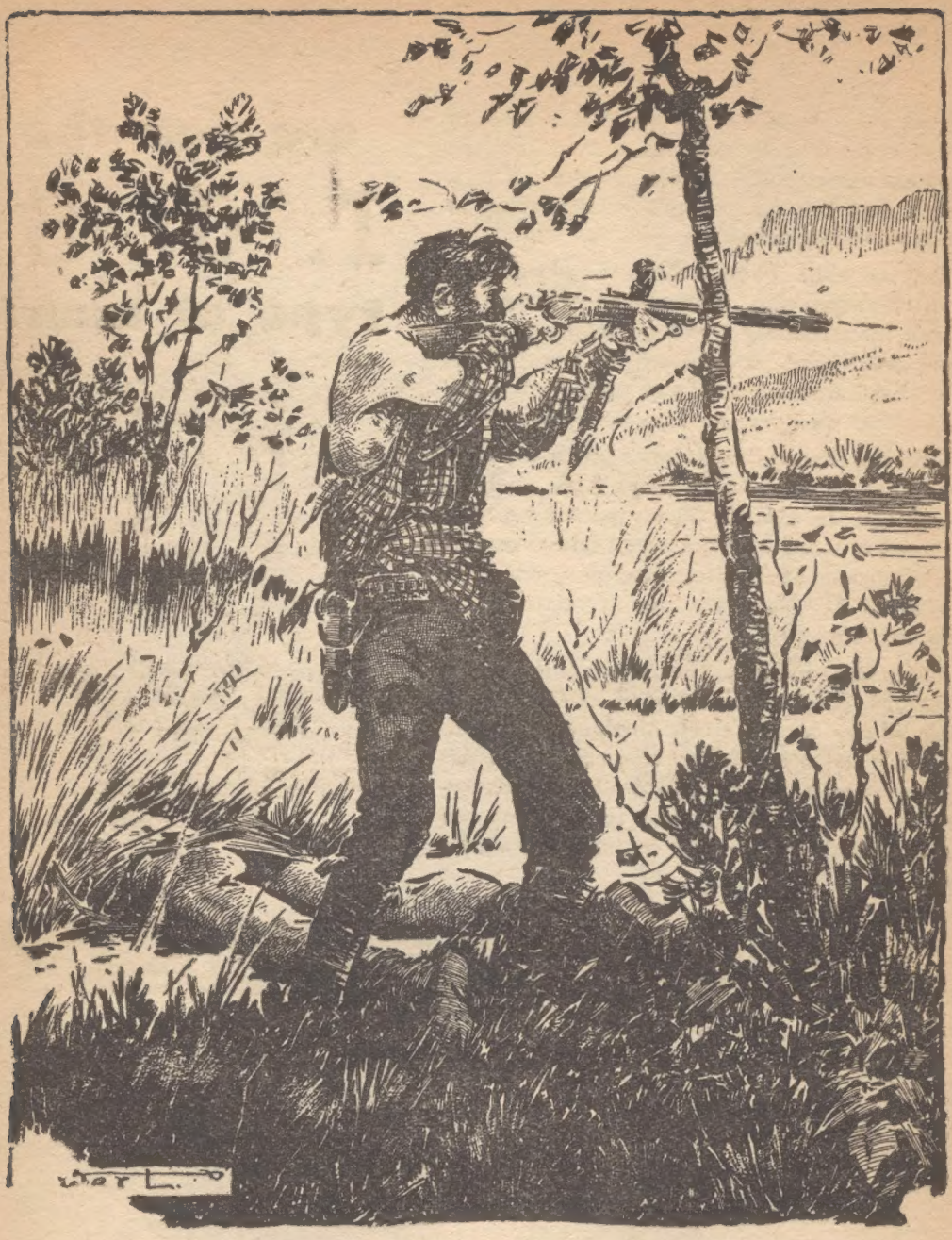


APACHES AT DAWN

By FRANK CARL YOUNG

Could a crew of badland desert rats save their mangy scalps from avenging Apache braves? Clate Kildain knew the answer: Not when redskin treachery wears a white face!

Cartridge after cartridge Clate jacked into the chamber and triggered out. Jeanette was in that stage!

IT WAS SHORTLY AFTER DAWN when Clate Kildain heard the distant screams of agony coming from Two Peak canyon. The week before Clate had drifted two hundred cattle into the box-canyon, leaving red-headed Russ Hobbs as guard to keep buffalo from mixing with the cows.

Every muscle in Clate's long, raw-boned body now tensed. He was headed back toward the HEWITT & KILDAIN store, after being out a day and a half checking on scout rumors of Apache movements.

The instant Clate turned the canyon shoulder, he cursed and went white with rage. A hundred yards away lay Russ Hobbs, stripped naked, wrists and ankles staked to the ground. Kneeling around the screaming cattle-guard were three raven-haired Apache bucks, their scalping knives gleaming in the dawn's first sun-light.

The three surprised savages had spun around and came to their moccasined feet the instant Clate had thundered into view. Now one of them let out a wild, defiant scream and reached for a rifle lying on the ground. The other two, naked except for breech-cloths, sprang toward their ponies and lances. But before the last leaped away from the spread-eagled form of Hobbs, he plunged his knife to the hilt in the body of his mutilated victim.

"The dirty—!" cried Clate.

The Colt in Clate's fist roared. Flame spit out toward the mahogany hide of the killer. Forty-four calibre lead mushroomed through the savage flesh as the Apache buck reached the mane of his calico bronc and tried to swing up. The savage crumpled, his sun-blackened face thumping hard against the bony shoulder of his mount.

Clate, reckless with fury, instantly whirled his mouse-colored Jingles toward the other two on his left. The buck with the rifle had it leveled at his shoulder while he retreated toward the dragging reins of his nervous pony. With the crack of it there was a rushing hiss of air past Clate as he leaped Jingles forward and kept triggering.

The Indian's rifle flamed again. Harmlessly. For the spasmodic jerk of the Apache's fatally hit body threw off the sight. Jumping Jingles toward him, Clate drove his last bullet into the naked body pitching headlong to the grass.

The third buck had taken flight. Yanking his Winchester from his saddle scabbard, Clate flung himself from the dancing back of Jingles and went to his knee. Sighting quickly, he jacked shell after shell into the chamber and fired.

But the distance was already too great. And the savage was spread flat as a blanket along the back of his plunging pony.

Clate missed . . .

Standing up again, Clate wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Turning back, he picked up the rifle used by the Apache and examined it. Some lifeless settler's, he decided.

It was this growing possession of firearms by the redmen that disturbed Clate more than anything. It symbolized the mounting threat to every white man within miles of Apache Crossing. It particularly suggested an attack in the future upon the HEWITT & KILDAIN store that he and his partner, Aus Hewitt, operated there.

Returning to the stripped body of Russ Hobbs, Clate's gray eyes sickened at the merciless treatment of his now lifeless cattle-guard.

Every inch of Hobbs' body had been horribly tormented with knives. And now the flies and ants were in swarms.

Clate crouched down and freed the thonged wrists and ankles. As best as he could, he replaced Hobbs' torn clothing. Then draping the puncher's saddle-blanket over the lifeless form, he placed the saddle beside it to be buried with Hobbs later.

After bridling the luckless man's pony, Clate returned to pause above the range knight who would ride no more.

"Russ," he murmured solemnly, "you were just the beginning. Them red devils don't aim to forget the thousands of buffalo they're losin', or the soldiers. They'll get even. There'll come a day of livin' red hell around Apache Crossing. And it's a day damn close!"

In the far distance, the fleeing Apache vanished southward beyond the Blue Fork creek. Southward, where the nomadic, war-like tribes had the majority of their temporary villages.

Toeing into his wooden stirrup, Clate swung into his "center-fire" rig. Tying the long, split lead rein of Hobbs' pony to his saddle-horn, he touched Jingles with his "sunset" roweled spurs and rode southeast toward Apache Crossing. There, two years before, he and Austin Hewitt had established a store following three successful years of buffalo hunting and hide selling.

Clate's dream was to build a large herd and extensive ranch outfit. Hewitt's was to develop the store into the finest general merchandising emporium in the undeveloped Texas Panhandle.

Clate shrugged. He knew that neither of them might ever realize his individual dream now. If the Apache massed in big numbers and struck, Apache Crossing, their store, and all outlying settlers would be wiped out.

Clate rode on grimly. He must quickly establish an effective defense at the Crossing by concentrating every white man in the region at the store.

Then keep them there.

THE HEWITT & KILDAIN STORE stood seventy five yards back from the weedy banks of Blue Fork creek. Quarter of a mile down stream were the rippling shallows that gave Apache Crossing its name. For miles around stretched a flat expanse of short grass and prickly brush, heat and flies and snakes.

The store itself was built of cottonwood logs, chinked with mud. Partitions of split logs divided it off into four large rooms. But it was more than a mere store. It was more than just a place where buffalo hunters could buy guns and ammunition, skinning knives and ropes. Or where a distant settler or chuck-wagon rancher might come to get patent medicine, cans of vegetables or a piece of mail and tobacco.

The Hewitt & Kildain store was a symbol.

It symbolized civilization in all that vast expanse of lonely, savage grassland. It was a gathering place. It was the only wooden structure within an eighty mile radius where a white man might find amusement and companionship, brief escape from his loneliness.

Mid-afternoon found Clate loping in

with Hobbs' pony. In the shade of the sod-roofed shed behind the store, he found other mounts tethered, switching off flies.

When Clate recognized the three splendid Army horses, he frowned. It meant that some of the mouthy replacements for Troop J of the Sixth Cavalry were inside. Without doubt they would be nagging his pardner, Austin Hewitt, to play poker. Hewitt whom the disgruntled Army men never seemed able to beat . . .

Clate dismounted and went inside.

About eight men were present. The first figure Clate saw was Phil Eaton. The fifty year old buffalo-hunter was cocked back on a crude chair against the hide counter. Hair as long and black as an Indian's fell down over Eaton's ears to his sinewy shoulders. The moment he saw Clate enter, he took his stained pipe from his beard-framed mouth and called:

"I see yuh still got your scalp, Clate. Funny—that."

Clate met the hunter's pale, squinting eyes. Eaton had his hide-skinning camp a few miles west of the Crossing. More than any of those present, Eaton knew the Apache. Between Clate and Eaton there existed a deep, anxious understanding of the present Indian threat.

Nodding, Clate replied quietly, "I've still got mine. But Russ Hobbs hasn't. Here's his pony bridle." With that, Clate significantly dropped the leather gear into the grizzled hunter's lap.

Into Phil Eaton's pale eyes leaped quick alarm. "So it's begun!" he grunted, gravely. "Reckon I better bring Johnny Epp in. Good skinners are damn hard to get. I'd hate to lose him."

"Help me bury Hobbs first," Clate told Eaton. "We can pick up your skinner on the way in."

Clate then moved across the long room toward the small, rough-hewn bar. Behind it stood the tall, solemn figure of his pardner, Austin Hewitt. Hewitt, who never drank or smoked, was serving the three youthful troopers leaning on the bar. Serving them, although he had to use a cane to support his recently broken ankle, now in strapped splints.

The tongues of the three Troop J men were whiskey-loose. And Clate, as he swung around the end of the bar, knew beforehand what the subject was.

"C'mon, Hewitt!" grumbled one named Yates, whose yellow hair was the same shade as the narrow stripe running down the side of his cavalry breeches. "What do you say to a game?"

"Hell, yes!" growled his companion, young, dark-mustached Joe Wolf. "Give us a chance to get back the pay you took from us last week."

The third trooper Clate knew as Snyder. The stocky man gulped his whiskey. Then, eyes narrowing scornfully on Hewitt, Snyder snarled, "Don't be so damn close-fisted, Hewitt. You and Kildain got a fortune in this log-dump! Loosen up, an' give us another crack at that sack of gold eagles you're boardin'!"

Clate watched the calm, solemn features of his pardner. Hewitt was almost unbeatable at poker. But Clate knew almost to the word what his rigid, self-possessed pardner would say.

"Sorry, gents," he heard Hewitt pronounce, "but not today."

That was all. No additional excuses; no apologies. No explanation that, although he loved to gamble, he had imposed the principle on himself that it was bad for business to play with the customers.

WHEN THE THREE TROOPERS began to swear at his refusal, Hewitt smiled in his slow, self-controlled way. Then Hewitt saw Clate. Moving down the bar toward his grim pardner, Hewitt's dark brows gathered into a worried expression.

"How did you find it out there?" he asked quietly.

"Looks bad, Aus," replied Clate. "In the past two days I found enough sign to convince me the red devils are set to jump. Nearly lost my hair this mornin'. Same band got Hobbs—"

"Hobbs!" gasped Hewitt. "Where?"

"Mouth of Two Peak canyon, where I drifted those two hundred head to start my ranch. They made a terrible mess of him. After I get some grub, I'm takin' Eaton out with me to bury him."

Aus Hewitt frowned. Studying his long fingers, he said, "Clate, I almost blame myself for it. When you think how hundreds of other hunters like we used to be are still slaughterin' millions of Indian's main source of meat from Canada to the Rio—

hell, they're justified to hit the warpath."

"Aus!" clipped Clate, "You've got to stop figurin' that way—even though maybe you're half right. Main idea right now is savin' the scalps of every white man within eighty miles of the store."

Hewitt said, "That's a big order. Any ideas?"

"You know that Camp Stock near here is only temporary while Lieutenant Ramsay kills fresh meat an' rests his command of replacements. From what I understand, Ramsay's got to effect a junction with Lieutenant Colonel Devin McCaleb's column up on the Cimmarron. They're rigid orders."

Hewitt shook his head. "That Toke Ramsay is a stubborn devil."

"Right. An' he won't break orders," Clate went on. "But we've got to keep Toke Ramsay an' his twenty men right here at Apache Crossing for at least another week. By then, maybe, somebody can get up to Fort Ryder an' back with enough help to permanently tame all the hot-head Apache around here."

Hewitt's solemn eyes glowed. "You'll never do it. Toke Ramsay's got the heart and head of a ram. He'll never break orders an' stick here because of a single scalpin' an' scare talk."

Clate also feared that characteristic of the stubborn lieutenant. "I've got to make him, Aus," he replied, forking the crackling bacon from the pan. "Only with Ramsay's men around do we have any chance here."

Aus scratched the back of his ear. "Maybe if I played a little poker with Ramsay's mouthy recruits I could get an angle on how to handle the lieutenant."

Clate gulped his coffee, then grabbed the arm of his pardner. "Good idea!" he said. "But they're pretty bitter about you cleanin' 'em so bad last week, Aus. Go easy on them."

Hewitt looked squarely into Clate's sun-pinched eyes. "I can't help it if I'm just lucky," came his low, solemn voice. "You know that better than anyone, Clate."

Clate did. There wasn't a more strictly honest man in the whole Panhandle than Austin Hewitt. It was a reputation that Aus would defend fiercely at any time. And so would Clate.

"Sure, Aus." Clate moved toward the door leading out into the store. "But see if you can find out more about Ramsay. Soon as I get back from buryin' Hobbs, I'm ridin' over to see that ram-headed Army man."

Aus Hewitt painfully followed his tall, rawboned pardner out into the stock-filled store. While Clate stuffed fresh cartridges into his shell belt and took a pair of shovels from the storeroom, Hewitt returned to the three disgruntled troopers. After a few words, he agreed to their loud-mouthed insistence that he play cards.

Clate handed one of the shovels to the old buffalo hunter. A settler named Keeler, in for ammunition, looked on in perplexity. Two others beside the three troopers present seemed puzzled. One was a young vaquero known only as "Brazo". He had ridden in that morning from a big trail drive north for tobacco for the outfit. The other man was a hard-featured drifter with a pearl-butted pistol called Mike Smith. For three days he had been loafing at the store.

"Gents," Clate addressed them, "we're in for bad trouble. From the tracks and fires Eaton and I have seen in the last few days, we're certain the Apache are gettin' set to jump us—"

"That's a lot of damn hogwash!" raucously interrupted one of the youthful cavalrymen. "We haven't seen a red hide in weeks!"

"Tryin' to scare us, Kildain?" snickered the trooper named Snyder, as he and the others sat down at the table with Hewitt.

Yates, the tow-headed one with the bright teeth, jeered, "Mebby I better run home to my mammy. I'm so der-red-fully afraid of Indians!"

Clate swallowed the hot retort that sprang to his lips. They were replacements, comparatively new to the country. What it had taken him and Eaton years to learn in the wilderness they couldn't yet be expected to understand—or fear.

"This is no scare-up," Clate reminded them. He went on then to recount his experience of that morning, the death of Hobbs.

The dark-mustached trooper who had a little more whiskey than his companions snickered. "One scalpin'—so now every Injun in the Panhandle is headed for the famous Hewitt and Kildain store at

Apache Crossin'! What a joke! C'mon, Hewitt—deal the cards!"

Clate itched to lay his hands on the young hellion, yank him up out of his chair and punch his smartness down his throat. Instead he curbed his hot temper and turned to the other men.

"You men better stick right here for some time," he told them. "You'd have no chance out there alone. Here, at least, you got log walls."

They nodded agreement. With that Phil Eaton picked up his .50 calibre Sharps buffalo gun. With the "Long Tom" gun under his armpit, the shovel over his other shoulder, the bearded hunter headed for the door.

Clate followed him around back to the horses. Here they mounted and rode out toward Two Peak canyon to bury Russ Hobbs.

IT WAS CLATE WHO placed the last rock on the cairn over the grave. Sweat streamed from Eaton, and his beard had droplets on it. Leaning on his shovel, the hunter pushed back his hat and stared at the mound.

"Happy ridin', Hobbs," he murmured reverently.

While Clate fastened his shovel to Jingle's saddle, Eaton stuffed his pipe and lit it.

"Clate," he said, "after I break up my skinnin' camp an' start my skinner in toward your store, I'm loopin' around to tell the Comstock brothers to fan it in. Maybe, too, I can get a chance to reach Sandy Evans before sundown."

Clate squinted at the blazing, mid-afternoon sun. "I'll swing an' call in Knapp an' Reynolds, up on Del Norte creek. Those men are too good to lose."

"What about Lieutenant Toke Ramsay?" Eaton asked, curling up into his saddle. "Reckon you can convince him it's as bad as we know damn well it is?"

Clate dragged hard at his fresh-built cigarette. "Got to!"

Eaton and Clate separated a mile from Two Peak canyon. Swinging to the east, Clate loped Jingles toward Del Norte creek. The sweeping plain looked as peaceful as a New England back yard. But Clate knew that it was false. In those distant miles there lurked tens of dozens of savage minds glutted with but one idea—sweep their hunting grounds and homes around Apache Crossing free of all whites.

But how could he quickly prove it to hard-headed Toke Ramsay?

How could he convince the ram-like dispositioned cavalry officer of what he and Eaton sensed and felt more than they literally saw, but which they knew was true?

To an experienced plainsman so much was obvious, tell-tale. To a rigidly strict, close-minded cavalry lieutenant, all would be secondary to his strict orders to effect a junction with his superior officer up on the distant Cimmarron.

With many doubts, Clate rode into Camp Stock at sundown.

Dismounting at the head of the encampment "street", Clate heard signs of a disturbance coming from the far end of the twin row of half a dozen "A" tents. A bronzed faced corporal eyed him with recognition but without friendliness. The corporal then moved toward him stiffly and asked:

"What's on your mind, Kildain?"

"I want to talk with Lieutenant Ramsay."

There was a moment of silence. The corporal's eyes glowed with excitement. "An' the lieutenant sure wants to talk to you! Wait!"

Turning on his booted heel, the corporal strode briskly down between the tents to the last one. It was from here that Clate had heard the loud, angry voices. And now, as the corporal disappeared inside, he could see jerky movements of bodies against the tent walls.

An uneasy feeling swept over Clate. From the mess tent he caught the quick, estranged glances of a dozen or more troopers gathered there. At the flaps of some tents stood others, smoking or talking. Recognizing Clate, their conversation either subsided while they stared discordantly at him, or they turned away.

Clate shifted uncomfortably.

At this moment Lieutenant Toke Ramsay erupted from the last tent, deep-set eyes searching wildly for Clate.

Toke Ramsay was thirty-five, tall and thick-set. Discovering Clate waiting at the end of the broad dirt aisle between the tents, the lieutenant sucked in a deep breath and hunched his wide shoulders.

Then, chin in and forehead out, Ramsay stumped angrily and ram-like down the "street" toward Clate.

At twenty yards Clate could easily see the flash of the lieutenant's fierce, blue eyes. And now he saw staggering from the tent from which Ramsay had left, the three troopers who had earlier nagged Hewitt into a poker game. They were hopelessly drunk—and in an ugly mood.

Toke Ramsay jerked to an antagonistic halt before Clate.

"Lieutenant Ramsay," began Clate at once, "I've come to ask your help in a defense of the store at the Crossin'. Phil Eaton and I have seen many Apache signs of—"

"Kildain, you listen to me!" roared Toke Ramsay, his explosive fury all but smothering his comprehension of Clate's words. "For the last time your store an' its rotten amusements have made a discontented mess of my command! Ever since—"

"Now, Lieutenant," began Clate, curbing his rising anger, "you must remember that—"

"Shut up, Kildain!" snapped Ramsay. "I'm talkin'! Ever since I've been within four miles of your place, my men have come in drunk, broke an' disgusted."

Clate's eyes began to narrow, "Look, Ramsay," he said with slow distinctness. "This isn't a Kansas state garrison. And I'm not a buck private who has to take your thick-headed mouthing. Your men get drunk and broke because they want it that way!"

From tents and mess-tarp men singly and in groups moved around the two angry men. Toke Ramsay, conscious of the absolute necessity of retaining dominant authority before them, took a threatening step nearer to Clate and blasted:

"Kildain, you're a liar! The whiskey an' gamblin' is but part of your store set-up to get hog-fat off Army pay an' any other damn fool who walks into it. They say no man can beat Hewitt at poker. I simply say that he can't be anything but a dirty, slick-fingered crook feasting on the monthly Army pays of lonely men!"

The uprush of blinding, hot blood flooded Clate's brain. His cool reasoning vanished; his mission forgotten. No man, no matter what his rank or reputation, could stand before him and damn the scrupulous honesty of his solemn, quiet pardner!

With quick deliberateness, Clate unbuckled his shell belt. Looping it with his gun over his saddle-horn, he stepped back and glared narrowly at the replacement lieutenant.

"Ramsay," he grated through clamped teeth, "I'm goin' to beat every damn word of that down your throat!"

A gleam of delight flicked into Toke Ramsay's blue eyes. Thick-set and powerful, he was confident, eager. Slipping out of his coat, he tossed it at one of his men.

Kildain, you're gettin' the Army lickin' you need!"

Ram-like, chin in, Ramsay suddenly lashed out. But his beefy fist caught Clate's shoulder instead of his mouth. Over-anxiety.

The crushing, hammer-like drive of it half twisted Clate. And in that split instant, Clate realized that had it landed where Ramsay intended, the fight would suddenly have been over!

Whirling back, Clate smashed the hard knuckles of his right fist into Ramsay's face. The lieutenant's eyes squeezed with pain and surprise. For a moment Ramsay hesitated, side-stepped. Then, toes kicking up dust, he came lashing in again, his ponderous fists arcing viciously before him.

"Beat hell out of him, Ramsay!" blasted the drunken Snyder, his two whiskey-glutted friends swaying beside him. "Kick him in the teeth!"

Clate defensively stabbed out rights and lefts. He felt bone beating against his own bone; felt cheek and belly give to his driving knuckles. But Ramsay kept coming, teeth bared—slugging viciously.

His mouth bleeding, Clate gave ground. He caught the glint of early triumph rise in Ramsay's eyes. The officer came thrashing in again, eager, hurried.

"Atta-boy, Toke, ol' kid!" came the thick, liquored voice of Yates, the blond trooper.

"Git him in the guts, then hammer his eyes in!"

The raining blows fell faster than Clate could block them. Senses jarred, breathing hard, he stumbled back. If he could just pound one or two blows through Ramsay's flailing attack. Could stop Ramsay's rushing advance. Could get his own off-balance

body set again, put his whole weight behind—

Suddenly Clate's backing boot-heel hit the tent-stake behind him. Before he could recover himself, he went over backwards. Striking the taut rope, with his side, he crashed down in the dirt on his arm.

For a moment Toke Ramsay stood spraddle-legged above him, panting.

Clate waited for the puffing officer to leap down on him. Expected it. The men closed in, excited. Snyder and his two drunken pals roared for the lieutenant to pounce on him and maim him.

Ramsay stepped back.

"Get up, Kildain!" he rasped. "Get up!"

Surprised, Clate came to his feet quickly. At once Ramsay came ramming in at him again. But Clate had had the split second he needed to get his body set. With all his weight behind it, his right speared out straight and rigid.

It pierced through Ramsay's beating fists, crashed against the officer's mouth. Ramsay's head snapped back. For a moment his ram-like drive was halted—and Clate quickly hurled lefts and rights to embrace his brief advantage.

Blood began streaming from Ramsay's big, high-boned nose. Missing with another deadly right, Clate felt the slugging smash of the officer's mallet-like left as it crushed into his ribs. Coming together, heads butted against each other, the two kept mauling their fists piston-like into belly and rib. Grunting and puffing, first one was driven back, then the other.

Suddenly they broke apart—bleeding.

For a moment they glared at each other. Wary respect glinted in the hot eyes of each. Silent, the troopers watched them. They sensed that the "kill" was at hand.

Gasping for breath, chest heaving, Clate made his bid. As his fist abruptly cut out at Ramsay's blood-smeared face, the lieutenant came ramming in again with his shoulders hunched, knuckles flailing—willing to take punishment in order to cudgel Clate with his beefy hands.

Clate punched out rights and lefts. Jarred, head jerking back, Ramsay suddenly stopped. His chin was no longer down. Shaken at last, he stumbled back—and back again.

Clate followed him, quickly. Pounding and jabbing, he slammed Toke Ramsay backward across the street. Directly behind Ramsay was the front of a tent. The panting lieutenant reeled—and then there was the sharp, bony crack of Clate's crushing fist.

Unconscious, Ramsay pitched backwards. There was the splintering of wood as his shoulders hit the center pole of the tent, snapped it. Crashing down inside, the collapsed canvas folded down over him like a shroud.

There was no further movement from Toke Ramsay.

For a moment there was no other sound but the distant wail of a coyote. That, and the tiny, sharp cry of a bird flying westward into the last, faint glow of the dying sun.

Sucking big mouthfuls of air into his aching lungs, staggering with exhaustion, Clate pulled his swollen eyes away from the shrouded heap. In all his life no man had been harder to beat. And none had fought more fairly than Toke Ramsay.

About to turn around, Clate suddenly heard a warning shout. It came from one of the troopers. There was a scuffling of boots, a vicious curse in a familiar voice—and then there was a crushing, painful blow on the back of his head.

A sharp gasp—and Clate's legs buckled and he dropped unconsciously to the dust.

II

WHEN CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNED to Clate Kildain, it was dusk. His first sensation was one of wetness. His second sense perception was that he was lying on his back in deep grass, and that an evening sky with early stars was a very pretty thing to behold.

Then he heard the gurgling voice of the stream.

Sitting up, Clate discovered that he was on the bank of the Blue Fork creek that snaked behind the small cavalry encampment. Also that his hair, face and chest were soaked with water. At the same time, he became aware of company—two sober faced troopers.

The one holding the half-filled bucket of water said, "You better get back to the Crossin', Kildain. I don't think the lieutenant's going to be happy when he comes to. I'll bring your horse here."

Clate swayed up on his feet and the other trooper handed him his hat. "Who—who hit me?" asked Clate, touching the painful lump on the back of his head. "Yates—Snyder—or Wolf?"

The trooper's face was expressionless. "I won't tell you that, Kildain," he replied. "But he's in the guard-tent now for it."

With that the two Army men walked toward the line of tents sixty yards away. A few minutes later, one returned leading Jingles, then wordlessly went back to the camp.

Clate solemnly took his gunbelt from the horn and strapped it around his hips. A heavy sense of failure took hold of him. Rubbing his battered mouth and jaws, he forked his rig and headed Jingles back to Apache Crossing—a depressed man full of the uncomfortable knowledge that his hot-headed loyalty had cost the store the support it needed so badly.

Half an hour later Clate splashed through the shallows of the Crossing. Out of the darkness ahead winked the lamplight of the only wooden structure within eighty miles. Certainly now the store was the only hope the local settlers and transients had. For Toke Ramsay was sure now to move out quickly toward the Cimarron.

As he approached, Clate hailed the store. Otherwise, he could have been mistaken for a prowling Apache buck—and shot.

After being recognized, Clate first attended to Jingle's comfort. When he finally stepped into the smoke-glutted store, he found the eyes of every man leveled at him—hopefully at first, then with understanding and dismay.

For Clate's battered features spoke plainer than words.

"So you didn't make out, eh, Kildain?"

It was old Phil Eaton, the long-haired hunter, who spoke. Clate moved in, passed the men scattered at tables and along the cluttered walls. He recognized the Comstock brothers, Knapp, Reynolds and Keeler. Aus, his solemn pardner, seated behind the hide-counter, composed and silently watching, nursed his strapped ankle.

But someone was missing.

Passing Eaton, Clate replied, "No, I didn't make out, Phil. I lost my head."

The buffalo hunter arched his eyes questioningly. "An' the fight, too?"

"It was kind of even," replied Clate, feeling Aus' eyes hard on him now. "Where's Sandy Evans? You said you would bring him in."

Phil Eaton took his pipe from his mouth. "Sandy will never be in. I buried him."

"You mean—"

Eaton nodded gravely. "Yep. They got him just like they got Russ Hobbs. Only worse. Reckon them red heathens will be jumpin' the Crossin' a damn sight sooner than we figured. An' there'll be plenty!"

Clate turned away, toward Aus. Now more than ever he felt stabbing remorse over his tactless, hot-headed handling of Ramsay.

"C'mon back in the kitchen, Clate."

The deep sound of Aus' voice held something new and anxious within it. Back in their small eating quarters, Clate explained what had happened.

Aus shook his head. "It's partly my fault, Clate," he replied. "I shouldn't have played them three—Snyder, Wolf an' Yates. Guess I should've let 'em win, like you said."

"Forget it, Aus. I talked you into it," replied Clate. "Their kind always make trouble. They got Toke Ramsay figurin' us wrong, an' I know I didn't help any. But, damn-it-all, when that thick-head started callin' you a crooked—"

"Thanks, Clate," interrupted Aus, "I'd have punched hell out of him myself for that. We'll just have to gamble on the men we got here and hope the Apache don't mass up as much as we figure."

Clate met Aus' eyes squarely. "That's only kiddin' ourselves, Aus. We haven't got a chance without more help. I'm figurin' on gettin' through to Fort Ryder—"

"I've already thought of that," broke in Hewitt, sliding the pot of warm coffee from the stove and shuffling painfully to the table. "But you're not going to make that ride, Clate."

Puzzled, Clate paused in smearing bacon grease over his chunk of bread. "Why not?" he asked, "The store's our responsibility, an' so are the gents that are in it now. You don't think I'd ask

one of the boys out there to risk his neck, do you, Aus?"

"It's not that, Clate." Hewitt filled the two cups, then limped to the chair on the other side of the table. "I want you to do something for me. Something I can't do myself because of this broken ankle. I want you to ride up to the stage-station down at Henshaw's Hill."

"What the devil for?" puzzled Clate.

"To keep my sister Jeanette from coming down here—"

"What!" exclaimed Clate. "You mean Jeanette is on her way to Apache Crossing? Why, this is the last place in Texas that a woman should ever be—and especially right now! It's suicide!"

Hewitt looked steadily over the rim of his cup. "I know that," he replied. "That's why she's got to be turned back. If she came here an' anything happened to—" Hewitt broke off; then went on: "Charley Black brought the mail down from Montgomeryville while you were gone. In her letter she says she'll be on the next stage leavin' from there. That means that by tomorrow mornin' she'll be at stage-station at Henshaw's Hill. An' that's too close, with the Apache about to jump us."

Clate had seen Hewitt's picture of his sister Jeanette. She was a lovely woman of twenty-five, a school-teacher in Philadelphia. He knew of the great love that existed between them. Parts of some of the letters she had written and which Aus had read off to him told him that.

"But, Aus, it would be more right if you—"

Aus tapped his splint-strapped ankle with his cane. "If I could hold a stirrup with this busted ankle for that distance an' back, I'd go myself, Clate," he said. "But I can't. An' it's got to be a fast ride. Clate, you'll do it, won't you? You'll go to Henshaw Hill for me an' make that sister of mine stay there an' take the return stage back to Montgomeryville?"

Aus took Clate's silence for refusal. "Guess I'll have to ask one of the other men after all . . ."

"Wait a minute, Aus!" Clate broke in, spluttering. "I'll do it! But if I'm a little clumsy, an' she writes you about it later, just remember this—I haven't seen a woman for a few years!"

"Sure—sure thing, Clate." And Hewitt was at once smiling, quickly pouring Clate more coffee. "Jeanette sort of knows you pretty well, of course. I wrote about you often."

That caused Clate to nearly choke on a chunk of buffalo meat. Gulping, he looked helplessly at Hewitt.

"You didn't say too much, did you, Aus?"

Hewitt grinned. "Don't worry, Clate. My sister won't bite you." Then, more soberly: "But be firm with her, Clate. She's got a will of her own. She'll insist she ought to come on down with the stage anyway. Make her stay there an' go back next trip."

Clate didn't relish the balance of his meal. He would favor the prospect of facing a party of raiding Apache rather than argue a pretty woman out of her plans. But since Aus was physically unable to do it himself, then he must try—somehow. For the Crossing would be no place for a white woman during the murderous onslaught he was sure was to come any day now.

At this moment Phil Eaton poked his long-haired head in the doorway. For a moment the hunter's pale, squinting eyes measured the two pardners understandingly.

"Aus," he said, moving into the kitchen and taking his pipe from his mouth as he spoke, "help fill me a grub sack. I'm goin' ridin'."

Clate was familiar with the old hunter's habit of understatement. "Where yuh figurin' on headin', Phil?"

"Fort Ryder."

Aus shook his head. "You're too old, Phil. But say—how'd you know we had that in mind?"

The grim plainsman tapped his stained teeth with his pipe stem. "I jes' guessed you boys were a figurin' something like it, back here, that's all. An' I know a dang lot more about Apache an' Cheyennes than any man here. Besides, I know the commandant at Fort Ryder. An' what's more, nobody's familiar with the range between here an' the Fort like I am. Now if anybody's goin' to have half a chance of gettin' to the Fort for help without losin' his wig, it'll sure be me. Savvy?"

"But look, Phil," Aus began to pro-

test, "you're not so young anymore—"

"Don't argue!" growled Eaton.

"He's right, Aus," Clate admitted. "He's better qualified for it than any of the others. While we're gone, you give the men tools an' put extra rifle ports in the store walls. We'll need them."

Ten minutes later, Eaton, armed to his teeth, bid the men in the smoke filled store farewell. Then he slipped out into the darkness. For a moment after he left a deep, respectful hush gripped the room. Every man present was fully aware of his dependence on the old hunter's ability to get through.

Shortly before midnight, Clate shook hands with Aus, then eased quietly out the back door. Cinching his saddle and rifle scabbard on Aus' big chestnut mare, Bianca, he slid into the creaking leather and lifted his eyes to the twinkling sky. Picking out the star he needed for a guide, Clate reined the mare into the black night toward the stage station at Henshaw's Hill.

Toward a pretty woman with a will of her own . . . .

DAWN BROKE WITH the promise of sunshine in Montgomeryville. At Brock's Hotel and Bar, passengers down out of Dodge City spent the intervening days until the stage left for Apache Crossing and the Hewitt & Kildain store. And Gus Brock had few scruples concerning the character of his guests—just so they paid.

For this reason, Squint Draper and Seb Newell felt quite comfortable in Gus Brock's hotel bar this morning, waiting for the Crossing stage. Both men had been ousted from Dodge City, as even too undesirable for that reckless town.

At this early hour of the morning the barroom was empty except for the two men. Squint Draper, one elbow on the bar roll, lifted his whiskey glass to his taut, thin-lipped mouth. He was a tall, thick-set man of about thirty-eight. Dirty-nailed and blunt-fingered, his shadowy, deep-set eyes locked with his companion's while he listened to the latter speak. Due to an injured muscle, the lid of Draper's left eye always remained half-shut, throwing his block-like features off-balance.

Twice in Squint's life he had killed. Killed white men. So the peace-marshal of Dodge finally decided Squint should go. Twenty-four hours he was given to leave or be shot out of Dodge by the grim lawman who was a shade faster and more accurate than Squint.

The same ultimatum was handed Seb Newell.

Seb was twenty-eight, blond, and a derringer-toting dandy. Bright, white teeth gleamed from his sensuous mouth, and his keen eyes glittered like jewels. Originally a precision-fingered draftsman from New England, Seb Newell soon discovered his top aptitude and talent—cards. Equipped with a mathematically trained but misdirected mind, clever manipulation of deuces and aces became his obsession—and his curse.

"I tell you, Squint," Seb was insisting, "Hewitt and Kildain store down at the Crossin' has greater possibilities than most men ever stop to figure."

"There's plenty talk about it around Dodge," admitted Squint Draper, after he gulped his whiskey. "It might build up big like you say. But your idea of gamblin' it away from Aus Hewitt sounds to me like an order you ain't goin' to fill, Seb."

"Why not?"

Squint thoughtfully poured himself another whiskey. "I've heard plenty about Aus Hewitt," he replied. "Soldiers an' skinners an' cow-hands alike—they all claim he's the straightest an' toughest poker player to beat west of the Missouri. It'll take some fancy card tossin' to back him into a hole where he'll have to stake the store to get out."

Newell grinned. "I can toss them fancy. Remember?"

"Yep. An' Dodge tossed you out, too. It c'n happen down at Apache Crossin' the same way, amigo."

Young Newell remained quiet for a moment. Then he grabbed the whiskey bottle and stared thoughtfully at the label. Finally he poured a very small portion in a glass.

Lifting the glass, he studied the gunman beside him. "Squint," he said, "the business of seeing that I'm not thrown out is to be your part of the deal. Apache Crossin' isn't Dodge. If necessary, your gun an' rep ought to be able to pacify

a lonely store in a wide open wilderness."

Squint walked uneasily away from the bar. At the door he paused, watched the early sun paint the dusty street a warm yellow. He remembered seeing men die in dust like that. Two of them. Two who had stood before his smoking gun.

"Knew much about Clate Kildain—Hewitt's pard?" he asked.

"Some. Not much. Hear he won't take much fooling."

"Most men out here won't. I don't mean that!" And Squint seemed impatient and irritated.

"He and Hewitt killed quite a few buffalo before they started the store."

"Anybody can hit a buffalo!" snapped Squint, jaw tensing. "You know what I mean, Newell. How does he work a Colt? What do they say about that?"

Seb Newell threw a coin on the bar. Then he went to the door and laid his slender hand on Squint Draper's thick shoulder.

"There's been talk that he's quick with it," admitted the gambler. "But look Squint—take it easy-like. This Kildain hombre sure couldn't stack up against gents like Tip Cole and Marty Reiss—and you dropped them, didn't you?"

For a moment the strained expression on Squint's coarse face eased. His blunt fingers touched the butt of his low-slung gun—reflectively. He wet his lips, and for a moment he seemed satisfied and pleased with himself.

"I guess you're right, Seb."

At this moment the thud of hoofbeats broke the dawn silence of Montgomeryville. From the direction of the livery stable the four horse stage rattled down the street and drew to a creaking halt before the porch of the Brock Hotel.

Up on the front boot, reins wrapped in his gnarled fingers, sat hawk-featured Andy Bishop, the driver. Kicking on the brake, he climbed down into the street dust, adjusted a trace chain, then moved in under the hotel porch roof.

"C'mon, all ye critters aimin' fer 'Pache Crossin' an' points below!" he called out, heading for a last drink at the bar. "Bounce out an' grab yore seat fer the damnedest ride west o' the Missouri an' no'th o' the Rio!"

Grunting a terse greeting to Draper and Newell, Bishop slid past them through the doorway to the bar. A moment later the gunman and gambler saw Gus Brock come from the shabby lobby and fasten several boxes and suitcases into the rear boot of the stagecoach.

"Here she comes now," murmured Seb Newell excitedly.

The beautiful young woman stepped from the hotel doorway onto the porch. First thing to halt the breath of a man was her hair. It hung long and in gleaming coils of chestnut loveliness about her shoulders. As she moved lightly across the broad porch toward the waiting coach, there was the gentle swing of dark traveling skirt and cape, and a glimpse of a neat, powder-blue shirtwaist.

Seb Newell's keen eyes glittered with aspiration. "Aus Hewitt certainly has one beautiful sister."

Draper's squinting eye twitched with surprise. "When did you find out who she was?"

"Gus Brock told me last night. She's been here a couple of days, waiting for this stagecoach. Brock says she told him she was going down to the Crossing to live with her brother."

III

SQUINT Draper formed one of his rare smiles. "I figure it's going to be a right nice ride down to the Hewitt and Kildain store," he quietly observed, as the two moved toward the stage. "Just her and us."

"Be careful what you say," warned the gambler. "Remember—Aus Hewitt's her brother, an' he's to be our prize meat."

"Near a woman like her I could be a saint," vowed Draper. And he meant it.

Leaving the porch, Jeanette Hewitt stood a moment before the step of the coach. Mingled with the eager determination in her deep brown eyes was the faintest suggestion of fear of this strange new land where only men seemed to exist. Far removed, indeed, it seemed from the peaceful security of her Philadelphia school room.

"Allow *me*," came a pleasing voice. At the same time Jeanette felt a gentle hand touch her arm.

She had been about to lift her foot to

the high coach step. Now, beside her, stood a slender, blond figure with gleaming teeth and doffed hat, offering her assistance into the coach.

"Thank you, sir," she smiled.

"The name, Miss Hewitt, is Seb Newell. My companion, Mr. Draper, and I are also traveling to Apache Crossing—to—to investigate cattle raising possibilities. It will be a pleasure to accompany you."

Jeanette Hewitt's clear brown eyes closely scrutinized the sleek gambler, then the coarse gunman. Her small but firm chin stiffened a little more. Then an adventurous twinkle came into her bright eyes.

"How nice of you," she said, taking the seat that would allow her to ride forward. "My brother will be very grateful."

"Now, now!" protested the gambler, humbly. "I can assure you your brother will not have to thank us for anything."

Squint Draper coughed.

Andy Bishop, the driver, came from the bar, wiping his mouth. Gus Brock handed him the small packet of mail. A moment later the long-shanked driver was up on the seat, slamming the reins over the rumps of the wheel horses.

The stage jolted forward. Late that night it would be in Apache Crossing. But in between it would make two stops for brief rests and fresh horses.

One of those stage-stations was Henshaw's Hill, where Clate Kildain meant to change a woman's mind. . . .

Henshaw's Hill was a lonely place. Located on the crest of a rise, the long, one-story shack, stable and shed behind it resembled a slouchy sentinel in the vast sweep of grass and mesquite surrounding it.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and Clate Kildain was hot, anxious, and smoking impatiently. He stood in the shade, leaning against an end post supporting the sod-roofed canopy fronting Henshaw's shack. Jess Henshaw himself was either inside, or back in the stable with the relief horses.

"Damn the ideas some women get!" grumbled Clate, batting away the fly attacking his bruised cheek. "I ought to be back at the store!"

Clate's puckered gray eyes reached out across the sun-hammered plains, southward. Apache country. A land festering with redskin hatred of white. A land not yet fit for a woman.

Clate swore, looked northward again, and began to roll another cigarette. Suddenly his fingers paused. The dust-plumed speck on the far horizon could be but one thing—the stagecoach reeling down from Montgomeryville!

At once there came a quickening of Clate's pulse. He didn't understand or like it, but he couldn't stop it. He forced himself to roll his cigarette. Then he set about arranging his mind with the firm arguments he meant to use to make Jeanette Hewitt remain here at Henshaw's Hill and take the return stage back to Montgomeryville and eventually home.

Fifteen minutes later the stage came screeching and rattling to a halt.

"All out, folks!" yelped skinny Andy Bishop, climbing down monkey-like from the seat. "Change nags here. Yuh got fifteen minutes to nurse your throats and kick off the dust!" Suddenly seeing Clate standing in the shade, he yelled: "Well, I'll be damned! Clate Kildain! What the devil are yuh doin', 'way up here, yuh old hide-chasin' pole-cat!"

"Got to make talk with one of your passengers," replied Clate; and with that Bishop hurried inside to join Henshaw and share a bottle of whiskey.

Seb Newell, the gambler, was the first to step from the coach. Clate watched him turn and extend his hand to someone the coach's interior still shadowed.

A moment later Jeanette Hewitt was standing in the full light of the Texas sun—sharply beautiful.

Clate gasped.

Jeanette saw him standing beneath the sod canopy. She had heard the driver address him, and now her soft mouth parted in a smile of appreciation. She walked toward Clate.

"Mr. Kildain," she said, wondering at his bruised lips and purpled cheek bones. "How nice of you to be here. I just know Aus asked you to escort me the rest of the way."

For Clate it was worse than he had expected. With a woman as extraordinarily lovely as Jeanette Hewitt standing

but three paces away—the first he had seen in two years—he was lost!

He choked up. His throat and mouth went dry as rosin. Nor could he remember a thing he had carefully planned to say so firmly, so authoritatively. He could only stare and feel awkward and wonder what in the world could be happening to his suddenly paper-like knees!

HAD IT NOT BEEN for Seb Newell and Squint Draper, Clate might not have found his voice or thoughts for some time. But after Jeanette introduced the two, something associated with one of the two names broke the brief paralysis within Clate.

His eyes met and accusingly held Squint Draper's.

"Miss Hewitt," Clate said, and he spoke very slowly, measuredly, "your brother *did* ask me to meet you here. He asked me to tell you to go back home."

"What!" exclaimed Jeanette incredulously.

"Just that," Clate went on, the nearness of her beginning to have its inhibiting effect on him again. "Right now Apache Crossing is no place for a woman. You will have to stay here and take the return stage back to Montgomeryville where it's safer."

"I certainly will not!" And the strong-willed eyes of Jeanette Hewitt flashed. "I've traveled nearly two thousand miles already, and the last few aren't going to keep me from seeing my brother!"

An odd expression of decisiveness worked into Seb Newell's young face. Squint Draper nonchalantly moved off to Clate's left, as if seeking the shade beneath the sod canopy. By casual, unnoticeable degrees, he came to be slightly behind Kildain.

Paying neither much attention, Clate went on, "I know it's a shame, Miss Hewitt, but it just can't be that way. The Apache are gatherin' for a big raid. It'll come any day and your brother's store will be the center of it. Why there'll only be a handful of men there to defend it and themselves. It'll certainly be no place for a lady."

Jeanette's chin hardened, tilted up. "My brother's there, isn't he? Well, I intend to be there with him—no matter what's going to happen there!"

Keen-minded Seb Newell instantly saw how to advance his own cause. "Mr. Kildain," he said, "it's my opinion that Miss Hewitt is over twenty-one. She has every right to decide what she will do. Apparently she wishes to be with her brother. Now that should end the argument and allow Miss Hewitt to go inside and refresh herself for the rest of the journey."

Clate had identified Newell for the slick gambler he was. His dandy appearance and smooth manner were very characteristic.

"You're mistaken, Sewell," Clate disagreed. "If you and your friend want to go on through to Apache Crossing with the stage, that's up to you. Two more guns would be right handy down there. But I don't aim to be responsible for Aus' sister losin' her life by allowing her to come along."

"It happens to be my life, Mr. Kildain—not yours!" Jeanette protested sharply. "And I'll do with it what I like. I'm going with the stage no matter what you say!"

She *was* beautiful, thought Clate. But Aus was right. She had a determined will of her own. And certainly no understanding of the danger ahead.

"Sorry, Miss Hewitt, but I'm not going to allow you to board it—even if I have to use force to keep you here until..."

The hard, unexpected jab of the gun muzzle against Clate's side brought a grunt of surprise from his lips.

"You won't be usin' force on anybody around here, Kildain," came the bass, monotoned voice of Squint Draper. With a quick move, he plucked Clate's gun and handed it to Newell to empty it. "The lady wants to go to the Crossin'—an' we're seein' that she gets there. Now you an' I will take a little walk to the shed an' you can get your hoss an' move on out."

Clate twisted his head and looked into the uneven eyes of the gunman. He realized he'd been a fool, not having paid more attention to Draper's earlier movements. But Jeanette had occupied all of his interest. And now, with Bishop and Henshaw engrossed with a whiskey bottle

inside, there'd be no interruptions.

Taking the empty gun from Newell, Draper stuffed it back into Clate's holster. For a moment Clate said nothing. But what he read in the coarse, block-like features of the gunman confirmed all the deadliness that he had heard about the man.

Draper *would* jerk that trigger if he made the slightest aggressive movement...

"You're holdin' a top card right now, mister," Clate murmured, "but I'll get another deal later on."

"C'mon, Kildain," and Draper motioned with his gun, "Move along."

Moving toward the shed twenty yards behind the shack, Clate called back over his shoulder:

"Miss Hewitt, listen to me! For your own good, stay here and take the return stage home. Go back before it's too late!"

BEFORE THE CORNER of the shack could cut her face from his view, Clate thought he saw the birth of indecision in her lovely eyes. Thought he saw some of the resoluteness dull in her expression. But he couldn't be sure . . .

Squint Draper kept his gun leveled and his mouth closed until the moment Clate swung astride the big chestnut mare beneath the shed. Then, his droop-lidded eye sparkling oddly, Draper monotoned:

"Yuh know, it jes' ain't nice, buckin' a lady's wishes, Kildain."

Clate settled reluctantly in his saddle under Draper's steady gun. There could be no making a break for it—with an empty gun. He had no choice but to back off.

Ignoring the perverted excuse for using force and threat, Clate squinted probingly at the gunman.

"What's down at the Crossin' that your kind could want, Draper?" he asked.

There was a delusive tilt to the killer's mouth as he droned, "Jes' sight-seein', Kildain. Pretty country, down that way —Apache an' all."

The evasion didn't surprise Clate. Recognizing the futility of words, he lightly touched Bianca's flanks with his spurs. The big chestnut's muscles flexed, and Clate somberly trotted out from Henshaw's Hill southward toward Apache Crossing.

For awhile a pair of resolved brown eyes followed his receding figure.

Clate kept to the wheel-rutted trail more often than not. Letting Bianca set the pace, he reloaded his gun and pushed on through the hot afternoon. In the middle of it, he rested the big chestnut mare and ate from his grub sack.

Then on again.

On again through the lonely, hammering heat of the Texas sun. At times a grassy rise would lift him above the vast, surrounding flatness. Clate would then look back. And most often he would catch a glimpse of the moving speck far behind that told him the stagecoach was keeping to the same trail.

He had thought of going back to the station after reloading his gun. But now he could see that he would have gained nothing. It would certainly have led to a shooting showdown with Draper. But not even that would have helped. Not even that, he knew would have convinced Jeanette Hewitt to go back. Nothing would. And certainly he couldn't have grabbed her and tied her to a post with a rope till the stage left!

Not a woman he was gradually wanting, more and more, to be able to see every day for the rest of his life . . . .

Clate visualized Aus' disappointment when the stage arrived with his sister. But to counter it he kept thinking of their desperate need of extra guns and extra trigger fingers at Apache Crossing. The stage might be bringing a white woman into danger, but offsetting it was the fact that it was also bringing Seb Newell and Squint Draper—certainly a pair that could shoot *very well.*

Throughout the afternoon Clate pushed Bianca on through the rolling miles of waving grass, mesquite and buffalo wallow. At sundown he reached the shallow crossing of Tierra Oro Creek. On the opposite bank was a broad clump of cottonwood and shrub through which the stage trail threaded.

With Bianca hock-deep in the center of the crossing, Clate let the chestnut mare drink while he rolled a cigarette and watched the first shades of evening approach from the east.

"C'mon, Bianca," he called at last, "Let's be rockin' home."

Lifting the mare's head, they splashed across the creek and entered the gray gloom of the trees. The mare's hoof-beats echoed back to Clate, and his thoughts drifted back to a lovely face and long, beautiful hair.

Suddenly Bianca gave a snort, shied a step.

"Easy, Bianca!" And Clate's hand folded warily around the butt of his Colt.

The moment after his fingers touched his gun, the woods exploded with life. From the limb of a tree above the trail, a naked, dark-skinned body plummeted cat-like to Clate's back. Powerful fingers went around his throat, squeezed.

At the same instant two fiercely painted Apache bucks sprang from the brush and grabbed Bianca's bridle. Another two, shrieking and grunting, grabbed Clate's leg and thigh and began to wrench him from his saddle.

With the stench of dirty sweat and foul breath of the naked, strangulating thing on his back glutting his nostrils, Clate dragged his gun free. His finger squeezed. As the forty-five crashed, there was an abrupt scream of pain. Then steel-like fingers closed over his wrist, and he fired wildly as he was half-strangled and at the same time torn free of Bianca's cavorting back.

Hitting the ground, the Indian buck on his back drove Clate's face into the gritty soil. Still keeping his grip on his gun, Clate kept firing, desperately hoping a slug would find a copper-hued hide.

Choking and gasping, Clate felt the Colt torn from his fingers just after he triggered out the last bullet. Fists like vises gripped his wrists and arms, dragged his squirming, kicking body back from the trail into the woods.

ONE APACHE BUCK LAY dead in the trail, Clate's bullet in his flesh. Three others, naked except for loin cloths, hauled Clate to a small clearing. The remaining Indian led Bianca into the woods and tethered her with the saddleless Indian ponies on the edge of the tiny clearing.

The last shafts of sunlight stabbed through the upper branches of the trees. But at their bases the grayness of evening had begun to gather. And in this waning light, Clate helplessly watched and strained to understand his terrorizing captors.

They left him with no doubts as to the manner of his finish . . .

While two kept him pinned down on his back, the other two used their steel, trade tomahawks to lop off inch-thick branches. These they quickly cut into four stakes. Then, while the others stretched out Clate's arms and legs, one of them hammered the four into the ground beside his wrists and ankles.

Clate swallowed hard. He instantly remembered Russ Hobbs and Sandy Evans. And he imaged the gruesome details of what was to come.

A wave of cold nausea swept over him.

Their fierce eyes laughed at him. Their teeth flashed with promises of horrible viciousness. And while they thonged wrist and ankle to the strong pegs with rawhide, their guttural language beat upon Clate's ears.

From the little that he understood of the Apache tongue, Clate managed to piece together the idea behind the attack. They had been lying in wait for the stagecoach—a wagon they didn't want to have reaching Apache Crossing with more men or guns. Clate's lone approach was a welcome surprise, and his capture a prize to be celebrated with their most devilish forms of torment. But first they intended to halt the stage and add to the number of subjects for torture and death in the clearing.

They leaned over him and spit in his face. In their wild, savage eyes Clate read not even the faintest suggestion of mercy. They hated him and all his kind with a bitter loathing bred out of years of unscrupulous encroachment, deceptions, and the rapid destruction of their main source of food.

Clate knew they would spare him no torment.

At this moment there came a faint sound foreign to the rest. It was unmistakable. And every buck Apache's features instantly tensed with recognition and eagerness.

It was the distant sound of hoofbeats and grinding wheels—the sound of the approaching stagecoach from Henshaw's Hill!

Like soundless wraiths, the four sav-

ages gathered up their rifles and moved through the evening shadows to the edge of the coach trail. Crouching in the brush near the bank of the creek, they waited with cocked guns for the oncoming coach to splash into mid-stream.

Back in the clearing, Clate turned pale. He stared skyward, through the leafy branches overhead, his eyes bulged with nerve-shaken terror. But not because of himself.

Jeanette Hewitt was on that stage!

What would happen to her would be far worse than any form of torture imposed on him. Insanity would be her ultimate end. They would spare her nothing!

Droplets of sweat beaded Clate's bruised face and forehead. Penetrating the silence that surrounded him came the increasing sound of the approaching stagecoach.

Every muscle in Clate's powerful back and arms strained into bulging, steel-hard cords of tension. But there was no breaking the rawhide. And there was no snapping off of the stakes.

Clate's breath came in frantic gasps now. His mind raced for a way to freedom. A way to get at least just one hand free. Just one!

Suddenly he knew there was a small chance. If he could move one of the wrist stakes just a little sidewise, back and forth . . .

With the tempo of approaching hoofbeats becoming more distinct by the moment, Clate strained his flattened wrist forward—then back. Forward—then back. Again and again!

Slowly — so infuriatingly slow! — the play in the stake hole increased. The veins stood out sharp and blue and twisted on Clate's neck and forehead. From his wrist blood began to trickle, as the strained rawhide began tearing away the tormented skin.

He could hear the trace chains now. Hear the jingle of them. The creak of the rocking coach. And in a minute or so the hoofs of the lead team would splash into the water of Tierra Oro creek and the Apache would—

The stake was loose!

With a vicious upward yank, Clate tore it free of its earthy vise. For a second he glanced pantingly at the dangling peg still thonged to his wrist. Then with desperate deliberateness, he twisted partially on his side and dug his fingers into his pocket until he touched his clasp knife.

Holding it between his teeth, he pulled open the blade with his free hand. A second later he was slashing at the rawhide binding the other wrist.

At this instant there was the mingled rattling and splashing of hoofs as the stagecoach hit the waters of the shallow creek crossing. Before Clate could touch the knife blade to the rawhide on his ankles there came the sharp crack of a rifle. An Apache rifle. Then another.

An instant later there was a terrorizing cluster of shrill yells as the Apache broke from cover, firing and racing toward the creek and the coach in the center of it.

With frantic slashes, Clate freed his two feet. Staggering up on his numb limbs, he stumbled to where Bianca was tethered with the Apache ponies. Yanking his carbine from his saddle sheath, he half ran, half stumbled and staggered into the wagon trail.

What he saw brought a sharp gasp from his swollen mouth.

The stagecoach was anchored in midstream, one bullet-struck lead horse thrashing painfully in the traces. Draped lifelessly over the rail of the front boot was Andy Bishop, the driver, his life-blood trickling into the waters of the creek.

FROM THE DOOR of one side of the coach came the bark of pistol fire. Yellow flashes spiked through the evening light. And down at the creek bank a jerking Indian buck lay face-down in the water, his rifle stuck muzzle-first into the mud.

The other three Apache kept firing and splashing through the shallows toward the coach. In a moment they would reach . . .

The carbine at Clate's shoulder cracked. A pencil of fire streaked down the trail. The swarthy buck nearest the stage abruptly stiffened. Twisting half around, the Apache staggered and went to his knees, clutched at the wagon wheel.

Cartridge after cartridge Clate jacked into the firing chamber of the Winchester and triggered out. But the light was bad, and his semi-numb arms unsteady. He missed. And he only wounded one of the

other two. But he drove them yelling and screaming with pain from the creek, out on to the opposite bank, where they quickly vanished into the tall grass and shrub and evening darkness.

"Jeanette!" cried Clate.

Then he was stumbling to the water's edge, wading through it toward the coach. Raising his rifle, he mercifully put a finishing bullet through the head of the threshing, pain-stricken horse. Then he was at the door of the coach, peering inside.

"Jeanette!" he cried again, fearing the worst.

He could just see her, crouched low on the floor, white-eyed with fear and mouth agape. She didn't speak. She couldn't—yet.

Seb Newell, the gambler, sat in the shadows. In his hand was his arm-pit .38. his other held his handkerchief to his neck. It was red.

"That you, Kildain?"

For, being hatless with face dirtied and bruised, Clate was hardly recognizable in the shadows of dusk.

"Yes. Hurt bad?"

"Just a graze on the neck," replied the gambler.

And still Jeanette failed to find the words to speak, or the emotional release to utter them.

Clate then stared straight into the dubious eyes of Squint Draper. The gunman's Colt was still in his blunt, dirty-fingered fist, still warm. It had been his slug that stopped the buck Indian at the creek bank.

Clate and Draper eyed each other challengingly.

A slow tension gathered.

"How's it to be, Kildain?" asked the coarse featured killer. "You're also holdin' a top card on me—this time."

Clate understood what he meant. He could shoot Draper as readily as Draper could him. But that would mean two less men for the defense of Apache Crossing—and now Jeanette Hewitt.

Clate glanced at the darkening sky. It was too late now. There couldn't be any other choice.

"I can make it be any way I want," he told Draper icily. "Put up your gun an' help me cut out the dead horse. Can't get back to Henshaw's Hill or Montgomeryville now."

For a moment Squint Draper hesitated. Then, sucking in his breath, he sheathed his six-gun and splashed into the stream.

The door of the coach was now open. And Clate had a clearer view of Jeanette's beautiful but frightened face. He was about to turn away when she spoke hesitatingly.

"Thanks—thank you, Mr. Kildain." Her voice was faint but rich with gratitude and awakened veneration. "I was—they—I'm awfully glad you—you were so near."

In turn Clate now found it difficult to find the words to fit. Instead he closed the door, muttering: "Got to git movin' along. Late. Only goin' to have one team now."

Back in the shadows Seb Newell's bright eyes glowed with relief. For awhile it had looked as though his enterprise at Apache Crossing was doomed. Prospects were now brighter. Although he now had to give some credence to Clate's prediction of savage destruction at the Crossing.

Cutting the dead horse out of the traces, Clate and Draper released its mate and tethered it to the rear boot of the stage. Then, with the gunman up on the seat driving, the stagecoach moved out of the creek with but one team pulling.

At the bank, Clate recovered his Colt from the dead Indian who had earlier torn it from his fist. Reloading it, he cut the tethers of the Apache ponies, scattered them, then mounted Bianca.

Sheathing his carbine, Clate fell in beside the stagecoach.

"All right, Draper," he called. "Whip 'em up! I'll tell you if you get off the trail. With luck, we might reach the Crossing before midnight with our scalps."

IV

GUS HEWITT WAS not a man usually given to exposing his emotions. But as the clock neared midnight, he began to bite his lips and limp restlessly among the seven men gathered in the store.

Johnny Epp, the old buffalo hunter's wiry little skinner, sat on a box of canned apricots, oiling his rifle. His little eyes

followed Aus' uneasy pacing. Turning to one of the big Comstock brothers who was working a slit port hole through the west log wall, he said quietly:

"Kildain should've got back from Henshaw's Hill two hours ago. Reckon I never saw Aus worried like this before."

Big Jake Comstock shook his shaggy head and studied the knife-like edge of his hand axe. "They're like brothers," he grunted. "I'd bet my poke Aus would go nuts if anything happened to Kildain."

"Likin' a gent that much ain't good," murmured Johnny Epp, working the lever action on his carbine. "Now you take me an' ol' Eaton—"

"Yeah, I know," Big Jake interrupted derisively. "You hate him so damn much that yuh nursed him like an' old woman fer a solid month last spring when he ketched the fever."

Johnny Epp colored and looked away sheepishly.

At this moment Keeler, the settler, pushed open the big door from outside. He had been posted as guard an hour before.

"Sounds like a wagon an' team comin'," he announced. "Might be a fancy Injun trick. Can't tell."

Every man was instantly alerted. Aus Hewitt quickly turned low the big kerosene lamp swinging overhead. Taking his pistol from his waist belt, he stood poised at the door, listening, cane in hand.

The grinding wheels and beating hoofs grew louder, closer. Lifting his gun, Aus opened the door a crack-width. Milkish moonlight bathed the road, gleamed from the surface of the creek beyond it.

Suddenly a lone horseman became distinguishable down the road.

"Hel-loo-oo, the store!" hailed the rider. "Hel-loo—the store!"

Not a man present missed the bright relief that swept across the somber features of Aus Hewitt. "It's Kildain!" he cried; and opening the door full, he limped painfully outside.

It was then that Aus Hewitt discerned the stage-coach rocking along a hundred yards behind Clate. Relief and joy abruptly gave way to perplexity and acrid disappointment.

"Clate!" he cried out, as Kildain swung down beside him. "God, man, I'm glad to see you! But—but the stage? Jeanette? I asked—"

Clate quickly grabbed his pardner's arm and said, "I'll explain later, Aus. Right now your sister is a frightened woman. She needs you."

Anger suddenly sprang into Hewitt's eyes. "I depended on you, Clate," he said. "This is no place for my sister, man!"

"I know it, Aus! But this particular stage happens to be carrying Squint Draper an' a gamblin' friend of his. The pair also got strong ideas for comin' here, like your sister—and Draper backed her up with a gun-play. Tell you the rest later."

The coach came to a creaking halt in the moonlight. Squint Draper dropped the reins, but kept his driver's seat. His hand remained near his gun, as he watched the proceedings.

The door swung open and Jeanette sprang out and ran toward her brother. "Aus! Aus!" she cried. "Is it you? Really you? Oh, Aus, I'm so—I'm so—I-I want to cry, Aus!"

For a moment Aus resisted her. Then he relented and his big arms went around her. Folding her close, the moonlight glistened in his wet eyes, his cane falling at his feet.

"Sis! Sis!" he murmured, censoriously, "Why didn't you go back? Why didn't you do as Clate told you to?"

At this moment Seb Newell, the gambler, stepped from the dark interior of the coach. Seeing him, Squint Draper began climbing down from the front boot, but dubiously, alertly.

Clate moved forward to lead the team and coach to the sheds at the back. He heard Jeanette say:

"I—I guess I didn't believe Clate, Aus. I thought both of you just didn't want to be bothered with me here. I couldn't believe that it was really so dangerous, so bad."

Aus Hewitt looked angrily over her head at Newell and Draper. "I understand one of these two men backed up your insistence with his gun."

"Yes. But don't blame Mr. Draper," Jeanette hastily explained. "They really thought they were helping me. They misunderstood Mr. Kildain's warning the same as I did." She half turned toward

the squint-eyed gunman. "We know better now, don't we, Mr. Draper?"

Draper watched Aus Hewitt and nodded slowly. "I reckon so, Miss. Your friend Kildain was right handy when those Injun bucks jumped us at the creek."

"What!" exclaimed Aus. "What's this?"

The gambler explained it best and quickest with his smooth, flowing speech. Clate didn't linger to hear it. Instead he was gone around back of the store with the coach and team.

After stabling the team and attending Bianca, Clate gathered his rifle and a couple of Jeanette's traveling boxes under his arm and returned to the front of the store.

Hewitt and his sister, with the gambler and gunman trailing behind, were just going inside.

CLATE WATCHED the expressions on the faces of the rough, hardened men gathered inside. Most had not seen a woman in many months. They stared open-mouthed.

"Gentlemen, this is my sister — Miss Jeanette."

The voice of Aus was slightly apologetic. For he as well as Clate knew the disturbing influence the presence of a pretty young woman was likely to have upon men priming themselves on the eve of what might well be their last hours on earth.

None seemed able to find words to reply. Clate saw Jeanette hesitate, as if she meant to speak. Then she, too, suddenly seemed to realize the inappropriateness of her presence in this coarse outpost, and said nothing.

Seb Newell and Squint Draper took in the small group with quick, appraising glances. Then they drifted in the direction of the small bar on the far side of the big room.

Aus led his sister into the greasy, acrid-odored kitchen. Clate followed and read the expression of distaste and quick effort to conceal it that swept across Jeanette's travel-weary features.

"It's--it's just like you always wrote me, Aus," she said. She swallowed, glanced apologetically at Clate while he piled her boxes on the table. "I'm almost afraid to ask if there's any room left, or a bed for me."

"A bed?" Aus laughed derisively and shoved dried buffalo chips into the throat of the crude, sheet-iron stove in the corner. "Look, sis. There's blame little wood in these parts. A wall-bunk with stretched buffalo hide is the best we got to offer—an' figure yourself right lucky there's even that for you!"

In the soft lamp-light the effect of Jeanette's lovely, long chestnut hair and perfumed femininity entangled all of Clate's expressiveness.

Taking off his hat, he rolled up his sleeves and moved past her to the wash-basin and bucket of water.

For a moment Clate's and Aus' attention seemed to have abandoned Jeanette. Like some unwanted but tolerated child, she slowly, dejectedly, removed her traveling cape.

"I'm sorry, Aus," she said. "I really didn't understand how it was." Then her rounded jaw stiffened a little and her eyes puckered slightly with fresh determination. "But I promise I won't be a bother!"

Clate washed away the dried blood from his torn wrists and wondered. Wondered if before a week passed—or even a few hours—that voice would ever be heard again; or if any of them would be alive to be conscious of her womanly fragrance.

"Jeanette," replied Aus, as he moved a pot of buffalo stew over the flames, "an Apache bullet or arrow doesn't make polite distinctions between men and women. They kill either. Even schoolteachers from Philadelphia." He shrugged and swore softly. Then he turned around, grim-faced and told her, "Take your things into that room over there"—pointing his finger—"Clate an' I bunk in it, but we'll use the hide-room from now on—"

"No!" protested Jeanette, "I'll not put you two out—"

"You'll change your clothes, then come out here an' eat something!" Aus firmly interrupted her. "Then, as a change from teaching others, you're going to be taught something. You're going to learn right fast how to load, aim and fire a rifle. How to do what every livin' human soul inside this store will have to do almost any hour now—fight for the one and only life God gave you!"

Chastened and subordinated, Jeanette turned and obeyed.

Clate clumped across the rough-hewn floor, drying his hands. "Don't you think you could be a little easier with her, Aus?"

Aus Hewitt snapped a sharp, defiant glance at his lean pardner. "No! For her own sake she's not to be pampered—by anyone."

It was not a relaxed, sociable meal that they ate by the midnight light of the oil lamp. Later, leaving Aus and his sister alone, Clate went out into the larger quarters of the store. After examining the new rifle ports and the several windows that had been barricaded with spare pieces of packing boxes, he spoke for a time with Johnny Epp and Big Jake Comstock.

Merchandise had been removed from around the walls and piled in the center of the store floor to permit the men more freedom at the rifle slots. Several of the men were either sprawled out on the floor or sitting with backs braced against the log walls, rifles no more than an arm's length away—sleeping or trying to.

Clate's bruised eyes swept the big room. He discovered Newell and Squint Draper seated at the single table used for card-players. Draper had appropriated a bottle of whiskey and Newell was studying the backs of a deck of cards. Brazo, the vaquero, and Mike Smith, the drifter, sat cocked back on their chairs at the same table.

"Wonder what brought that pair down this way?" wondered Johnny Epp to Clate.

"I don't know," admitted Clate. "But I'm plenty certain it wasn't for any community uplift work."

Clate turned away and went into the narrow storeroom that flanked the kitchen on the opposite side from the bunkroom. Arranging his blankets for a mattress, he sank down on them, saddle-weary and exhausted.

For a few moments a Jeanette-filled fantasy occupied his mind. Then slumber quickly slipped its sheath of unconsciousness over him and he never stirred until Little John Comstock shook him at dawn.

"Clate!" called Little John. "Wake up! There's something movin' around outside—"

Clate grunted and sat upright. "W-what's the matter—?" His hand went instinctively to his gun, which he had kept belted on all night.

Clate recognized Little John's broad, blond-mustached face in the light of the candle held by the latter. Little John had been the night guard posted for the kitchen's north wall.

"Somethin' up?" Clate asked, coming stiffly to his feet.

"Mebby," replied Little John. "Somethin' movin' out there. Didn't want to wake up the rest, 'cause mebby it ain't nothin' but a coyote. Figured you could handle it better'n Aus."

The two slipped into the kitchen. Pulling aside a canvas shield over a gun-slot, Clate peered out into the dark grayness of dawn. At first he could distinguish nothing unusual. Then he saw it.

It was not much more than a vague blurr. It was just beyond the end of the stable and moving slowly, unevenly. Then it stopped.

Clate strained his eyes. Now the thing was moving again, with that slow—

"It's a horse!" he suddenly told Little John. "A horse without a rider. C'mon."

Unbolting the heavy back door, Clate and Little John slipped out into the cool dawn. Moving warily through the deeper shadows of the stable, they passed the end of it, went into the grass and approached the grazing animal.

Without any trouble, Clate reached it—and recognized it. There was neither saddle on it or bridle. But there was a knife-cut hobble!

A familiar hobble on a well known, blaze-faced sorrel—!

"It's Phil Eaton's horse!"

Clate pronounced it as he might have uttered a final declaration of doom. Little John grunted his dismay. "That can mean only one thing, Clate! They got Phil jes' like they got Russ Hobbs an' Sandy Evans. Old Phil never got to Fort Ryder for help!"

The dawn light became brighter. And Clate stared at it, and knew that the old buffalo hunter must be lying on his back somewhere in the savage darkness northward—his sightless eyes never again to be filled with the light of any day.

"I don't know if we oughta tell Johnny Epp right off or not," worried Little John, as they started to haze the sorrel toward

the stable. "Him an' old Phil were like brothers."

Clate slapped the sorrel into the shed and worked a tethering halter on it. "No way out of it, Little John," he said, as they moved back toward the kitchen door. "The others have a right to know just what their chances amount to now."

The right to know that they had *no chance at all*, thought Clate to himself, as they slipped inside again. The right to face the stark reality of certain death. The right to make whatever peace they could with themselves and God before the overwhelming red onslaught was upon them.

Clate shrugged and went to wake up Aus.

DAWNLIGHT SEEPED between the cracks of the boarded window in the storeroom. Aus was now awake and sitting up on his blankets. Clate quickly told him of the return of Phil Eaton's sorrel and what it indicated.

"Good Lord!" gasped Aus, shaking his head. "That was the one final thing we all counted on—help from Fort Ryder!" Aus stood up and quickly began tucking in his shirt-tails. "Reckon Toke Ramsay an' his replacements have moved out yet, Clate?"

"Certainly!" replied Clate, touching his bruised, sore mouth. "That ram-headed lieutenant hated our place. By now he's a good many miles nearer the junction with his colonel on the Cimmarron. A square fighter, Ramsay, but sure a bull-headed one!"

"You know what it means, Clate?"

Clate replied gravely, "Yep. It means that there's not going to be any more than a dozen of us here at the store to stand off anywhere up to a hundred or more Apache."

"It can't be done," replied Aus, buckling on his cartridge belt and gun. "We're due to be wiped out, Clate."

For a moment a bond of silent understanding held the two men. Then they went out into the now fort-like store. Mike Smith, the drifter, and Keeler were awake. Rousing the others—sprawled in corners, along the walls, on the counter—Clate and Aus together explained the utter hopelessness of their position, based on the failure of the old buffalo-hunter to get through alive to Fort Ryder.

"You're free to help yourselves to anything you want to eat in the store," Aus added at the end. "An' you can use the kitchen stove as you need it."

Shafts of daylight from the rifle ports began to lattice the shadows. And Clate saw their faces. Saw the stiffened expressions of men trying to assimilate the jarring understanding that they had no chance at all.

There was a sharp, unintended sob.

It had escaped from Johnny Epp, old Eaton's long-shanked hide-skinner. The skinner was sitting on the floor, beside the counter. Clate saw him turn and hide his face from the men. He and Phil Eaton had been together more than twenty years.

From the kitchen came sounds of activity. Clate and Aus looked at each other, then went back to the greasy-odored room. They halted just inside the doorway—surprised and grateful.

Jeanette was stuffing buffalo chips upon the low embers in the stove. She was dressed in a plain, dark skirt and gray shirt-waist. Her hair was pinned up in coils at the nape of her neck and there was a smudge of stove-grease on her cheek.

Without looking at them, but sensing their presence, she said, "Maybe there's no use here for a schoolteacher—but there is for a cook!"

It was a long day. A day full of tension and impatience. Hour after hour the outside guards reported—nothing. And for as many hours the men inside took turns at the numerous rifle ports, their eyes studying every yard of the sweeping grassland around them.

Early in the morning Seb Newell proposed that gambling would ease the tension of waiting. A couple of men ridiculed the idea, saying there was no sense in either winning or losing, since none of them would live to either rejoice or regret it. But the others were for it, and finally even Aus consented to play.

The bright, glittering eyes of Seb Newell danced. Squint Draper who kept taking more turns at the rifle ports than the others didn't play. But now that Aus was in the game, he started to show signs of a strange uneasiness.

Clate noticed it—and made his final conclusions about the pair.

An hour before sundown Aus Hewitt

pushed back his chair and stood up. Across the poker table, before Seb Newell, were stacked practically all the chips. For a moment Aus' solemn eyes met and locked with the keen ones of the gambler. Then Aus turned and went into the kitchen where he found Clate and Jeanette talking together.

"Clate," said Aus, pouring himself some coffee, "our friend Newell is one mighty slick cold-decker. If I'm any judge, he came down out of Dodge to card-wrangle us clean."

Clate studied his sober pardner. "Yes, an' he brought Squint Draper along to back him up if things got rough," he added. "Draper's a killer."

Jeanette gasped, paled. "Clate!" she cried, unbelieving. "How do you know these things? Why, Mr. Draper was a thorough gentleman every minute in the stage."

Clate turned to Aus. "You remember me tellin' you about Tip Cole?" he said. "I met him in St. Louis when I first came west. Nice fellow. Well, it was Squint Draper who gunned him down for a price."

"Then you knew from the beginning?" puzzled Jeanette.

"Yes," admitted Clate. "And if conditions were different, your brother and I would drive the pair of them out. We've no love for that breed. But we need guns. We need fingers to pull triggers. And this is no time to start pickin' an' choosin' our company."

Aus Hewitt looked at his staring sister and nodded agreement.

V

THE HOURS MARCHED ON—slow, brittle and tense. The impatience for action began to tell on the men. There was petty bickering, sharp back talk, cursing.

"Wait—wait—wait!" suddenly screamed Big Jake Comstock, blindly whirling away from his rifle slot, "Nothing but waitin'!"

It was Little John, his brother, who grabbed him. Shaking his massive brother by the shoulders, Little John gradually steadied him, then led him to the bar. Here Aus poured him a drink, and between him and Little John they talked the bigger Comstock back to stability.

Back in the kitchen, Clate taught Jeanette the loading and firing mechanics of a carbine.

He showed her how to hold and sight it, and not to fear it.

Their hands touched often. Their shoulders. And soon Clate's constraint dissolved and doors opened within him and words flowed.

Later Aus and Clate went to the storeroom to get a few hours sleep. At midnight they were awakened by Brazo, for they were to be on guard until dawn.

After some coffee and sour-dough bread, the two pardners went into the store. The lamp was burning low, and Mike Smith, Reynolds and Johnny Epp were sprawled in slumber.

At the poker table, Seb Newell, his hat cocked back over his curly hair, kept idly riffling the cards. A few yards away, elbow on the bar, stood Squint Draper, his half closed eye giving him a dark, evil appearance in the semi-light.

"How about a little stud for awhile, Hewitt?" asked Newell.

Clate saw his pardner's mouth stiffen, angrily. Then Aus was suddenly standing beside the poker table, his steady, accusing eyes locking with the gambler's dancing ones.

"Newell," and Aus' voice was low but firm, "for years I was house master in the biggest gamblin' hall in St. Louis. I know your brand of slick-fingered dealing backwards." Aus paused; then emphatically: "Cut it out for the few hours you've left to live."

Newell's face flushed with guilt; but his eyes gleamed angrily. "I don't believe in this Apache attack idea!" he snapped. "An' I don't swallow accusations or threats, either!"

Squint Draper moved his elbow from the bar. Clate watched the blunt fingered gunman move uneasily to one side, just behind the gambler.

Aus grinned. "Threaten you?" he replied, derisively. "Why should I bother—when it's a sure thing we're all going to lose our hair." Aus pointed to the deck of cards. "Just deal 'em straight from here on out, fella!"

The gambler pushed back his chair and came to his feet, quick. "That's twice you called me a cheat!" he snarled, believing he

now had his looked-for opportunity. *"Draper—!"* he clamored

Clate's hand was a blur of movement.

"Don't pull it, Squint!" came Clate's sharp, warning voice.

Squint Draper stared with incredulity at the dark gun snout and lead-filled cylinder suddenly trained on him. He shuddered inwardly as he coldly realized that Newell's glib tongue had misled him in Montgomeryville. Clate Kildain was a gun-master!

"You, Newell—keep that shoulder gun where it is!"

It was Aus Hewitt speaking. And Aus' big hand rested on the burred grip of his holstered Colt as he spoke, his eyes frosty slits.

Newell glanced around, saw the glare of disapproval in the eyes of those men awake. Squint Draper speculatively blinked his weak eye. Then saying nothing, he simply let himself drift back to the bar again, where he began self-consciously studying his blunt fingers.

Aus said, "Shall we play now, Newell—*my way?*"

Newell swallowed and shrugged his shoulders. Then he sat down, subordinately, and rested his fists on the table.

"I guess you're dealing, Hewitt."

IT WAS AN HOUR BEFORE dawn. An hour before the time usually selected by savages for their attacks. For rarely did the Indian make his assaults at night, fearing that he might fall in battle in the darkness, which he believed would bring down upon him the displeasure of the Great Spirit.

Within the store there was an unnatural stillness. A hush encompassed by the essence of death.

Seb Newell lay slumbering on his folded arms on the poker table. Opposite him sat Aus, wide awake and alert. In the corner near the bar slumped Squint Draper, hand on gun, asleep. Half of the others were asleep, the rest in various attitudes of deep reflection, rifles close to hand.

Conversation had long ago withered into silence.

Clate had just finished making sure that each man awake had enough of the particular calibre ammunition he needed, when the sounds came—the distant pounding of hoof-beats!

Clate's glance swung speculatively to Aus' like steel to a magnet.

"Think it's it?" asked Aus, coming to his feet, with his cane.

Clate shook his head. "Can't be," he replied. "It's only one or two broncs."

"Maybe I better rouse up the rest, anyway," suggested Aus, grabbing his rifle.

"Let 'em sleep," differed Clate, moving to a rifle port and squinting into the darkness outside. "No sense spikin' up a commotion without being sure."

The hoof-beats grew more distinct, closer. Aus dimmed the lamp. When the rataplan of shod broncs seemed but seventy or eighty yards distant, there came a hailing shout:

"Helo-oo-oo, the store! Troopers ridin'! The store—helo-oo-oo! Troopers!"

Clate and Aus looked at each other with joyous incredulity. It was so hard to believe. But it couldn't be an Apache ruse, for it was pure English that was being shouted. Hope and relief sprang into the eyes of those men awake.

The hoofbeats were thundering close now, and Aus limped painfully to the door and pulled it open, welcomingly.

Blending with the drumming hoofs came the hailing cry again: "Helo-ooo-ooo—the store!"

The dim lamplight behind Aus Hewitt's outline in the doorway splashed out faintly into the roadway. His elongated shadow sprawled grotesquely in the road dust, his crotched, silhouetted rifle sticking down like a skinny third leg.

From the rifle slot in the front wall, Clate saw the three galloping horsemen suddenly loom up out of the darkness. But there was no slackening of their pace. It seemed as if they meant to keep riding right on past—

There was an abrupt, crackling fusillade of gunfire! The simultaneous discharge blasted powder flame straight for the figure outlined in the doorway!

"Aus—!" yelled Clate, horror-struck.

Clate leaped to the doorway as Aus Hewitt's rifle slipped from his limp arm and clattered to the floor. Aus stood S-shaped, chest sunken, knees bent, his head tilted forward.

As Clate quickly slipped his hands under Aus' armpits, the murderous riders flashed past the pattern of dim lamplight in the

road. Then they were gone, swallowed up in the night.

"Clate—I'm d-dying—"

The faint voice was Aus', but Clate seemed not to hear. He was numb. Staring. Like a stiff, mechanical prop, he held up his limp, bleeding partner.

It seemed unreal. It was too unexpected. They had hailed the store, announced they were troopers. *Troopers?*

Yes, he told himself, they were troopers. Cavalrymen. He was sure. He had caught a fleet glance of the broad yellow stripes down the legs of their breeches as they thundered past. But—

But why?

"Aus—brother! Clate! Oh, my God—!"

It was the shocked, shrieking voice of Jeanette. Clate's momentarily paralyzed reflexes began to function, and he immediately carried his dying pardner back into their old bunk room.

Every man in the store was awake by now, on his feet and muttering while Jeanette went down on her knees beside the wall bunk and her brother.

The eyes of Aus Hewitt never opened again. He breathed but faintly, and his lips stirred a little. But the murderous rifle slugs that had smashed through his chest were fatal.

"B-buffalo—the 'Pache's f-food, Clate," came the hardly audible voice. "We—we all killed—too many—"

Clate held the big hand of his calm, solemn pardner. There was a twitch to the fingers, and a long sigh broke the reverent silence of the room.

Aus Hewitt was gone.

It was Clate who pulled the blanket up over the motionless features he had learned to love so well. Beside him stood Jeanette, the tears flowing down her cheeks. The Comstock brothers, Johnny Epp and the others slowly moved back into the store like men stunned and bewildered.

Clate put his arm around the quivering shoulders of the only woman within that savage world. "We'll both miss him," he said. "I knew no other man in my life to be so fine."

Jeanette Hewitt lifted her reddened eyes. In them Clate read her sudden and complete dependence upon him. And he trembled inwardly with the terrible hopelessness of his responsibility.

But he didn't reveal it to her.

"I'll be back as quickly as I can," he told her.

She caught at his sleeve, desperately. "But—but where could you go? I thought there was nothing left but Apache Crossing?"

Clate's unshaven jaw hardened. "So did I," he replied. "But if three troopers can come murderin' from the east, then Lieutenant Toke Ramsay must still be at Camp Stock!"

Loading his pockets with cartridges, Clate gave minute instructions to all the men in the store. Then he spoke to Johnny Epp, the wiry skinner. Grabbing his rifle and hat, Johnny followed Clate out the back into the night toward the stabling shed.

Here they quietly saddled their mounts, then rode at a lope toward Camp Stock. As they splashed across the creek below the store, the first streaks of dawn light slit the curtain of night eastward.

IT WAS FOUR and a half miles to the encampment of Camp Stock. Four and a half miles of hostile grass-land, where every buffalo wallow and depression behind a ridge might hide a large party of vengeance-bent Apache.

Clate swayed to the lope of his grulla Jingles, slitted eyes slashing warily through the quarter light of early dawn. With the passing of Aus, something vital within him seemed to have died. Something warm and eager. Now he was cold, hardened and stolid.

Johnny Epp rode at his knee, an Indian ferret — beady eyed and wide-nostriled. They rode in silence. Incessantly alert for Apache sign, they finally rode up to the rim of the gentle rise that overlooked the cavalrymen's encampment at Camp Stock. And just as they reached the top, the uppermost tip of the sun blazed out its first rays across the land.

Clate and the skinner abruptly check-reined their mounts.

Both men gasped, appalled, their mouths hanging open.

Spread out below was a scattered rubble of lifeless men and horses and tents!

Camp Stock had been butchered in its blankets!

"Unholy blazin' hell!" cried Johnny

Epp. And then he shuddered and his skinny jaws locked hard.

Numb, Clate rode on down the rise, through the heart of the carnage. On either side of him, scattered, lay the slaughtered troopers. Many were just in their underwear, caught in the early, pre-dawn attack.

Several troopers he passed had not less than half a dozen arrows tufting out of them. Others were lance-pierced. Still others had died from rifle bullets. All were slashed and scalped.

Empty cartridge cases lay glinting beside every man, evidence of the desperate resistance they had shown. Three still had their sabres in their stiffened fingers, and one held a baby's shoe.

Tents were askew, broken, or collapsed. Blankets and equipment were scattered all over. And at intervals lay the horses, still bleeding from countless wounds—and dead savages.

"Look!" And Johnny Epp pointed his fingers toward the southwest.

Clate saw it then. Saw the thin, fading cloud of slowly rising dust in the distance. Dust stirred up by the departing hoofs of many ponies.

"That's *them!*" he muttered, coldly. "And it was a big party, Johnny. We've got to get back to Apache Crossin', quick! They'll strike before this day is over!"

Clate and Johnny whirled their broncs. There was nothing here they could do. And, pathetically, there was to be no help ever forthcoming from any of Lieutenant Toke Ramsay's replacements.

And then Clate heard it.

It was a groan. A painful moan, long and drawn out. And it came from the very center of the tiny battle-field.

Gently, Clate touched Jingles with his spurs. The big grulla moved cautiously through the body-littered grass, toward the slight rise. There, with his unbuttoned field coat around him, lay Lieutenant Ramsay, blood-drenched, an empty pistol in his hand.

Clate quickly kneeled down and leaned the dying officer against his shoulder.

"It's Kildain, Ramsay," called Clate. "Can you speak?"

The bloody, dust smeared features of the stubborn-chinned officer hardly twitched. The closed eyelids stirred a little, half-opened.

"Kildain?" The cracked, swollen lips parted and a fresh thread of blood spilled from the corner of his mouth. "I—I can't see you, K-Kildain. Where's you—your hand?"

Clate laid his fingers in the big, cooling hand of the dying officer. He felt the quick, desperate grip, the instinctive urge to cling to life.

"How many were there, Ramsay?" asked Clate.

The officer's head rolled against Clate's chest. He still had his scalp. It was unusual, but Clate knew there were rare times when an Indian, out of respect for a supremely brave enemy, will not touch his hair.

The countless wounds in Toke Ramsay proclaimed that stubborn, preeminate courage.

"How many, Ramsay?" repeated Clate.

For a moment the half-opened lids widened full. "Eighty—a hundred—m-maybe more," he whispered. "They h-hit us just before we d-discovered that Snyder, Wolf and—and Yates broke g-guard and deserted. We—had no—chance— In twenty minutes they—"

"So that's who it was!" interrupted Clate. "The three drunks who couldn't beat Aus at poker."

"Was—was what?"

Clate told him. And in the brief glance that Clate had of Ramsay's open eyes, he read the officer's shame as he accepted the responsibility for the murderous attack by his men on Aus Hewitt.

"I—I was a fool, Kildain," Ramsay whispered. "A mule-headed f-fool. I—I should have listened t-to you, but I didn't believe you—" His eyes swung away, toward the rising sun. A faint smile lifted the edges of his mouth. "You—you better go, Kildain," he went on, weaker now. "You b-better get back to your store an—an' build the defense I failed to g-give you. D-don't wait—for me—anymore. I'll be ridin' along w-with—with my men—in a minute—"

The voice of Lieutenant Toke Ramsay withered into silence.

Clate stared at his face.

For a moment Clate let his fingers remain in the lifeless fist out of respect for a stubborn but valiant officer. Then he stood up, glanced sharply and anxiously

toward the southwestern sky. The pony dust was hardly visible.

"C'mon, Johnny!" he cried, flinging his leg over Jingles' back. "Them red hellions have swung south of the store an' creek to pow-wow first before they swarm over the Crossin'!"

VI

CLATE AND JOHNNY EPP galloped up to the store at seven o'clock, the sharp, morning sun on their sweating necks. From a distance the building looked like one of the loneliest structures in the world—and it was. But it had four log walls and plenty of food and water. And, for eleven men and one woman, it was the only remaining thing that offered any measure of protection in all that wild, savage land.

Quickly stabling their mounts, Clate and Johnny went in the back door. Jeanette was in the kitchen, and while Johnny barred the heavy door, Clate told her to make herself ready.

"Then they're coming? Soon?" she asked, her eyes searching his.

"Yes!"

Clate quickly strode into the store, stood in the middle of it and gravely described the massacre at Camp Stock. The men became fixated and staring. Several swallowed hard and looked down at their boot-toes hopelessly.

"You can't live forever!" It was Mike Smith, the hard-featured drifter. His voice broke the silence, but his words failed to bring forth the cynical humor he expected from the others.

Seb Newell, the gambler, plainly showed his uneasiness. Until now he had discounted the menace of a serious Indian attack. With Squint Draper standing close beside him at the bar, he whispered anxiously: "Maybe we ought to grab a pair of broncs and pull out."

Squint Draper's mouth set in a hard line. "An' be skull-knifed half an hour later!" he grated. "Like hell! I'm stickin' right here. But I sure was one damn fool fer listenin' to you at Montgomeryville!"

"How soon do you expect it, Clate?" asked Kent Reynolds.

"Any minute!" replied Clate.

After checking his six-gun, Clate shoved Aus' Colt in his waist-band. Then stuffing his Winchester carbine magazine full, he moved from gun-port to gun-port to study the horizon. Dissatisfied and restless, he found Jeanette standing in the bunk-room beside her brother's shrouded form, holding a rifle.

"Jeanette," he said, finding it hard to pronounce the suicidal words he must say, "when it becomes necessary, use this"—handing her a small, pearl-handled derringer—"on yourself. It's your final defense."

She took the small gun, stared at it unbelievingly. "I thought maybe there might be—"

Clate shook his head. "I wish I could offer you just one grain of hope, Jeanette," he said. "But I can't."

And then they heard *it*.

It was faint and still distant, but certain. *It* was like the first murmurings of a great, onrushing wind. *It* was an even, low-pitched, drumming vibration that reached icily into the heart and nerves of every one tensed defensively within the lonely Hewitt & Kildain store at Apache Crossing.

It was the rataplanning hoof-beats of scores of Apache!

Clate saw every man spring to his rifle port, three men to a wall. With the windows boarded, only the rifle slots allowed bars of daylight to criss-cross the shadows.

Tense suspense impregnated the gloomy interior.

Moving quickly, Clate selected an axed-out gun-slit in the south wall and shoved his carbine through it. Then he motioned Jeanette to the first rifle-port in the west wall beside him. It brought their backs within a foot of each other, kept them within close speaking range.

Clate saw them first—a mile off, south of the Blue Fork Creek and the Crossing. A solid wall of them, with the dust mushrooming up behind them into a monstrous back-drop of gray.

"How many do you figure, Clate," called Johnny Epp, who stood on the other side of Jeanette.

"Not less than a hundred," Clate's voice was cold, metallic. "Most likely more. Hold your fire until you're sure of it."

"Ten to one," chortled Brazo, the va-

quero, from the east wall. "Interestin' odds!"

Clate rubbed the back of his hand over his bruised mouth, grimly, his eyes narrowing on the onrushing war party. He reasoned the Apaches would splash across the ford at the Crossing, half a mile down stream from the store, then loop to the east, the north and the west to form an enclosing circle.

After that—a battle of exhaustion that could have but one ending.

"I wish I had the power to exchange this for your Philadelphia schoolroom," Clate said, turning to Jeanette. "You were never meant for this."

There was a moment of silence between them. Then Jeanette turned and her brown eyes held his fixedly. "I—I think I was," she replied. "For a long time I felt I was meant to be wherever you are, Clate. That's really why I left Philadelphia."

The new wonder of her choked up Clate. But the increasing crescendo of pounding hoofs thundered down the urge to crush her into his arms, and he anxiously turned his eyes back to his rifle vent.

The large war party swept along parallel with the creek, but half a mile on the far side of it. Their naked, sweaty bodies glistened in the sunlight, and from the sweeping, undulating mass of them came the scintillating gleam of rifle and lance, of armulet, bridle piece and steel tomahawk.

Looking eastward, Clate watched them churn through the shallows of the Crossing. Watched them flow like a broad band of dark mahogany to the east, the north and west of the store—watched them begin their beleaguering, encircling movement.

It was eight o'clock when *they* made their first attack. The savage, rotating circle kept narrowing until it was a hundred yards from the store. Suddenly above the thundering sound of scores of pony hoofs came the first volley of rifle fire and whistling arrows.

LEAD WHINED past the store corners, splintered into the cottonwood logs, gouged into the mud chinking. There was the tinkling clatter as the glass went out of the windows, and arrows thudded and twanged into the eaves and doors and window barricades.

And one hissed through a rifle-slot—*into the throat of Brazo!*

The trail-vaquero gave a convulsive, strangulating cough and fell back. Hysterically grasping the protruding shaft with both hands, eyes bulging, he fell, thrashing, to the floor.

"Hold your fire!" Clate cried to the impatient others. "Wait till they're in closer!"

The girdle of yelling, revolving Apache narrowed even more. The fierce, black-haired horsemen lay low over the withers, pounding their moccasined heels against the heaving flanks, hammering every last jump out of their straining mounts. And as they drew in closer, ever closer, they kept hurling bullet and arrow at the silent, motionless structure in the center.

Clouds of dust roiled skyward. The sun was dimmed. The air filled with savage, blood-chilling yells, crescendoes of thundering hoofs and cracking rifles.

And then that wreath of death came within sixty yards—

"Now!" cried Clate. *"Let 'em have it!"*

From the gun-bristling four walls of the store came a crashing fusillade of deadly rifle fire. Flame spit out in every direction. Reached out to the murderous orbit of fiercely painted killers.

Pony back after pony back became bared. And the bullet-punctured slid down into the dusty maw of the great, grinding machine of mangling hoofs.

From then on every man in the store fired as rapidly as he could reload. The room became thick with acrid powder smoke and the curses of wounded men, desperate men toiling for the one life they had.

Empty shells clinked to the floor. Rifle bolts and repeating levers kept up a steady, clicking harmony to the crackle of rapid firing. And the preferred Colt of Squint Draper barked endlessly.

But lead and arrow also found its way *into* the store . . .

"They're breakin' up an' fallin' back!" cried Clate, some minutes later.

It was so. Dissolving their murderous girdle, the Apache withdrew and reformed into a solid mass three quarters of a mile away, out of rifle range, toward Two Peak canyon.

From outside the store came the groans and cries of the wounded savages left be-

hind. There was the pitiful, whistling snorts of fatally injured ponies. And Clate and the others spent shell after shell ending their misery.

Then Clate turned to take stock of their own casualties.

Brazo was gone, and quiet, little Jeb Keeler. Big Jake Comstock was bleeding from his armpit, but his brother Little John, was already at work on it. Kent Reynolds was the worst hit, with an arrow in his back that had come through a rifle vent across the room behind him. In addition, he had a pulpy, bullet furrow the length of his forearm and he was bleeding badly. He couldn't live.

"All right, Jeanette?" asked Clate, with feverish anxiety.

She stood there, facing him—white with tension and natural fear. But her beautiful face was smeared with rifle oil and at her feet were the empty brass cases of a dozen and a half rounds.

"Yes. Yes, I'm all right, Clate, but—" She paused.

"But what?"

She squeezed her eyes as if from nausea. "The way they fell—and died. I—I—" She caught herself and her shoulders went back a little. She managed a valiant little grin and said, "I'll keep trying, Clate."

"Good!"

And Clate turned and went around to the rest of the men. With Brazo and Keeler gone, and Kent Reynolds practically finished, their numbers were reduced to eight men—and Jeanette.

"They'll be back after they lick their wounds an' work up a chargin' pitch again," Clate announced. "That might be in ten minutes, or five hours." He paused, looked at them all, then asked, suddenly, "Who wants some coffee?"

It loosened their tension, and Jeanette carried the cups. The Comstock boys openly admired her grit at the rifle port, and Mike Smith, the drifter, smiled and jokingly remarked he once had a girl in Sacramento just like her, but not as pretty.

Seb Newell and Squint Draper kept to themselves. Neither spoke much, each appearing gravely concerned with his immediate future. Squint refused the coffee, but accepted whiskey to put a crutch under his wavering nerve. The gambler smoked excessively, the close smell of death awakening a conscience that nagged him.

Meanwhile, apple-cheeked Hugh Knapp and skinny Johnny Epp carried the bodies into the bunk room and closed the door.

And then at eleven o'clock came the second attack!

THE WALNUT COLORED horde rushed like a solid wall straight for the store, their feathered leather caps brilliant in the hot sunlight. Suddenly, at a hundred yards, the Apache swung into their old, girdling formation. Again the rifles cracked and lead and arrow rained upon the four walls of the Hewitt & Kildain store.

Clate, his eye behind the sights of his carbine, again counseled the men to hold their fire. At last he singled out the savage he felt certain was the chief. The brave was a splendid physical specimen, heavily painted and well armed, with a leather cap of scalp locks and antelope horns.

Again the savage girdle began to narrow. The crescendo of thundering hoofs grew louder, the mushrooming dust clouds dimmed the sun again, and the shrieking and yelling glutted the ear and curdled the stomach.

Clate picked his target—the horn-headdressed chief. He silently named him Twisted Nose, for that's the way the Apache appeared to him at this distance.

Then something unexpected abruptly happened—

From three different points of the whirling wreath of death sprang three double-burdened ponies. The three animals came plunging straight for the rifle-spiked walls of the store!

"It's a trick!" cried Johnny Epp, from the other side of Jeanette. "Duck down, Jeanette!"

She didn't move.

Clate recognized the intent of the desperate stunt at once. For none of the three braves were carrying rifles or bows—but pistols. By suddenly getting in close to the walls, and in between the rifle ports, they might shove a pistol barrel into the vent and empty its leaden death inside. The extra riders were but their breastplates until they reached the walls.

And each one of those human shields

wore the yellow-striped breeches of a trooper!

Clate gasped softly. For he suddenly recognized the human breastplate used by the daring buck plunging for his section of the wall. There could be no mistaking that bright yellow hair—what there was left of it. Nor the young, lifeless face.

It was Yates!

Yates—youngest of the three infamous troopers who had killed Aus Hewitt! That meant that the other two held upright before the breasts of the charging Apache bucks were the remaining drunks, Synder and Wolf!

Sometime during the night, the three deserters must have floundered into the arms of the gathering Apache. Without doubt it had stimulated the massacre of the remainder of Toke Ramsay's weakened replacements at dawn.

Now the contemptuous three—who would not listen—were returning to the store as mutilated breastplates!

"Git the ponies!" cried Clate. "Then the bucks!"

With the crack of his carbine, the pony bearing yellow-haired Yates stumbled. Folding at the knees, it ploughed its long muzzle along the ground a dozen yards from the wall. Yates' lifeless body thudded a few feet away. The Indian, cat-like, hit the ground on his moccasined feet, fired once and turned to flee.

Clate's carbine cracked.

The black-haired brave arched backward. Letting out a scream that reached above the thunder of racing ponies, he fell, his leather cap of scalp-locks and feathers slipping from his head.

"I got mine!" yelled Johnny Epp. "Pony fell on him and broke his neck!"

But apple-cheeked Hugh Knapp missed his and the corpse-shielded Apache reached the wall, reached up and shoved his pistol in beside Mike Smith's rifle barrel and triggered.

Six crashes blasted into the room. Mike Smith staggered back, his eye and head shot through. As he fell, Big Jake grunted and slumped against the wall, as two of the slugs entered his back.

As the victorious buck raced deer-like toward his thundering tribesmen to ride double, Squint Draper's Colt roared. The Apache went head over heels, and didn't rise again.

The next instant Squint abruptly sat down on the box of canned goods beside his gun-port. He sat there like one just wanting to rest awhile. But Clate saw the arrow sticking from his side, knew that in a minute or so it would be fatal.

"Better get him a last glass of whiskey, Jeanette," Clate suggested. "Nobody else's got time. Keep low an' don't forget that derringer! Here comes their charge—!"

The remaining rifles bristling from the store's walls again emptied one pony back after another. But the sea of ponies and naked savages kept rolling in on them.

Triggering as fast as he could lever, Clate drove slug after slug into the wall of the butcher-minded avalanche. Brave after brave fell from the lunging pony backs, vanished below in the deadly maelstrom of hoofs and hocks and dust. But always behind them came others, to thunder on and press the assault to its finish.

Flinging his empty carbine aside, Clate shoved his Colt into the gun-port. Suddenly sighting Twisted Nose in the pack again, he thumbed the hammer. The chief jerked. Pitching forward, the savage clung to the bobbing neck of his piebald pony. Again Clate smashed lead into the hideously streaked body.

The clinging arms parted, slipped—

And then there was a close, deafening, earth-shaking roar of pounding hoofs—and the blood-craving war-party was at the wall, hacking and beating at the window barricades with tomahawk, warclub and rifle butt.

Shoving Jeanette down into a corner, Clate pulled Aus' pistol from his belt and leaped forward to the nearest window-barricade splintering inward. As the dark, tomahawk-filled fist plunged through, Clate's Colt roared.

There was a grunt of agony and the hatchet fell.

A rifle butt abruptly smashed out the remainder of the window. A black-haired head ringed with scalp-locks appeared, a fierce, toothy face beneath it.

A knife flashed. At the same instant he fired, Clate caught sight of a naked body plunging through the window nearest Seb Newell. Before Newell could fire, Clate saw the keen blade of the Apache's trade

tomahawk split the handsome face of the gambler between the eyes.

At the same time, Johnny Epp plunged his skinning knife to the hilt in the Indian's back. Then he whirled to fire his six-gun into the face of another pushing in through the window.

Taking the derringer from her waist, Jeanette, eyes bulging white with terror, saw Clate empty his own gun into the yelling faces at the windows. Saw him turn Aus' Colt loose, and then slowly back toward her, using his body as a shield.

VII

JEANETTE!" Clate cried above the cross-firing, yelling bedlam. "Jeanette —when I go down, use it! Don't let them touch you—!"

Clate jerked as the thrown knife struck his side. Yanking it out even as he fired back, he half-twisted and shoved his fist into another snarling face half through the window. And again his gun blasted flame and lead into the brown flesh, saw them—

Saw them withdraw!

But the price came high. While the Apache broke in disorder to withdraw and mass again far out of rifle range, Big Jake lay dying in his brother Little John's arms, Squint and Newell were gone, and Hugh Knapp and Clate were wounded.

Only Little John and Johnny Epp remained without injury.

It was Johnny Epp who delicately worked with his razor-edged skinning knife on the arrow head imbedded in the back of Clate's thigh. The shaft had come in through the port in the wall behind him. Breaking off the protruding part, Clate had kept on firing.

Jeanette looked at the deathly chaos surrounding her. Of twelve men who had stood at the walls that morning, only five remained. And two were wounded, a third dying.

"The next time will be the last, won't it, Clate?"

The eyes of Clate and Johnny Epp met. Neither man could summon a response that he thought might help her.

"Next time they won't withdraw," Clate admitted solemnly. "Which gives me an idea." Reaching out, he grasped Jeanette's hand. "When Johnny's through with this leg, I'd like a cup of coffee with you—alone."

Her eyes held his for several moments. When she spoke it was like a precious whisper. "And I'd like a last one with you, too, Clate."

The Apaches made their final charge at three o'clock in the afternoon. Certain of the weakness of their prey, they changed their tactics. They didn't circle. They charged in a solid body, their object to swarm into the refuge of their depleted quarry and stay until nothing living remained

But already the Hewitt & Kildain store was lifeless!

Risking everything on his capacity to judge their intent and method, Clate had led the others from the store. Using the bulky outline of the store as a screen between the massed Apache in the distance and the weedy banks of the Blue Fork creek seventy yards away, Clate had planned one last gamble to save the lives of those left.

Now the five of them—Jeanette, Johnny Epp, Hugh Knapp, Big Jake and Clate—lay breathlessly concealed in the lee of the brush-rimmed bank, the gurgling creek at their backs.

On and on came the thundering, walnut-hued horde. Teeth flashing to their yells, their rifles and bows sped lead and arrow into the silent west-wall where the windows were splintered out and easiest to enter.

From where he lay on his stomach on the sloping creek bank, Clate could see but the edge of the plunging savages. But it was enough. Enough to time himself.

"If it don't work—God help us!" grunted Johnny Epp, lying on the other side of Clate, his rifle pushed through the weeds before him.

Jeanette was snuggled close to Clate's other elbow. She had her brother's rifle and her eyes were glued to the trading store that had been his dream.

The thunder of hoofs mounted, then suddenly slackened. Rifles cracked and savage shrieks split the air as the depleted Apache war party pounced on the store for the massacre.

"There they go in—!" signalled Little John from a point thirty feet away. "Set it, Clate!"

Striking a match, Clate ignited the end of a trail of gun-powder before him that led across the clearing to the hole beneath the store's front door step. There was a hissing sound and a finger of smoke began to hurry away from him toward the store —Aus' beloved store.

Clutching his rifle, Clate shuttled his glaring eyes from the racing ribbon of smoke to the yelling savages swarming in through the smashed windows. Riderless ponies were now milling around the walls. And from inside came the splintering crashes of tomahawks wrecking the shelves, chairs, boxes and—

BO-OO-OOM!

The earth seemed to tremble. The sky appeared to waver. And Clate's ear-drums felt crushed as the terrific explosion blasted out the walls and lifted the roof of the Hewitt & Kildain store.

BO-OO-OOM!

And as the second keg of gun-powder hurriedly buried beneath the store's plank flooring detonated, splintered wood and bodies erupted skyward and there was a great screaming of agony and terror and savage brown forms staggered from the flaming ruin, fell or stumbled on.

There weren't many. A dozen, maybe twenty. Shocked, confused, terrorized, they stumbled around for their frantic, squealing ponies. With desperate efforts, they climbed the cavorting ponies, beat heels into flanks and fled eastward toward the shallows of Apache Crossing where they crossed and swung south to the safety of their distant villages.

"Thank the Lord!" breathed Jeanette. "Oh, Clate, if you hadn't thought of the stock of gun-powder we would have been—"

She broke off. For suddenly there came a new sound. A sound that rose above the crackling flames and splitting logs of the destroyed store. A sound that an hour before would have been the most welcome in the world, but now was too late, but it didn't matter.

It was the trumpet blasts of a cavalry charge!

Sweeping out of the north, carbines gleaming in the hot sun, came two troops of United States cavalry—one hundred and twenty hard-riding plain-masters!

"I wonder how they found out?" grunted Little John Comstock rising up from the creek bank.

Clate got to his feet and wondered the same thing. A few minutes later the shouting cavalrymen swept past the burning store toward the Crossing and the remnants of the fleeing Apache.

Suddenly a horseman swung out from the rear ranks. Hair long and black as an Indian's fell to his sinewy shoulders. A black beard framed his seamed features, and he rode with the fluid ease of one born to the saddle.

"Phil Eaton!" shouted Clate, waving his arms to attract his attention.

Johnny Epp remained lying along the creek bank. The wiry little skinner's eyes became moist, and he kept nervously wiping at his trembling lips, as he peered through the brush at the old hunter.

The grizzled plainsman swung to the ground. The next instant Clate and Little John had him by the arms and were pounding him joyously on the back.

"Is Johnny Epp—?" was the first thing Phil Eaton asked, his eyes darting balls of searching anxiety. "Did they get him?"

Johnny Epp abruptly rose up from the brush, and there came his choking, roaring, half-broken voice of joy:

"Unholy, blazin' hell—*no!* Why, you big, long-haired son of a left-pawed coyote —we figured they got *you!*"

Clate and the others watched the two friends lock arms and rock back and forth.

"When your horse came back," Clate said, "we gave up all hope of help from Fort Ryder."

The old hunter grinned and pulled his stained pipe from his pocket. "I danged near didn't make it," he admitted. "The first dawn I pulled up at Old Woman's spring to rest the sorrel's back and get a little chow. I hobbled my horse, stripped off the saddle and let it graze for the ten-fifteen minutes I aimed to be there.

"Wal," Eaton went on, "it was still too dark to know that I had company. But I did. Two young 'Pache bucks. They knifed the hobbles and choused off the sorrel to make sure I didn't go anywhere till they got through with me." Eaton paused to light his pipe, glanced at Jeanette's oil-smeared face uncertainly, then continued:

"We had a right nice party—the three of us. Fer a spell, I figured my scalp-lock

was lost. But when I got through with my bowie-knife, they—" The old hunter glanced again at Jeanette and considerately eliminated the grisly details. "Wal, the sorrel was gone, so I tied my rig on one of their crow-baits an' lit out for the Fort again. But I'm afraid"— gravely swinging his eyes to the flame-crackling ruins—"the boys in blue didn't get here soon enough."

"Hadn't been for Clate's idea to bury kegs of powder under the floor an' bait 'em inside," said Johnny Epp, "you'd find all of us bald as stones."

DAYS LATER, after they buried Aus Hewitt and the others, and Clate's wounds healed, Clate rode out with Jeanette to Two Peak canyon, where he had drifted the cattle that were to be the beginnings of the great ranch and herd he hoped to build.

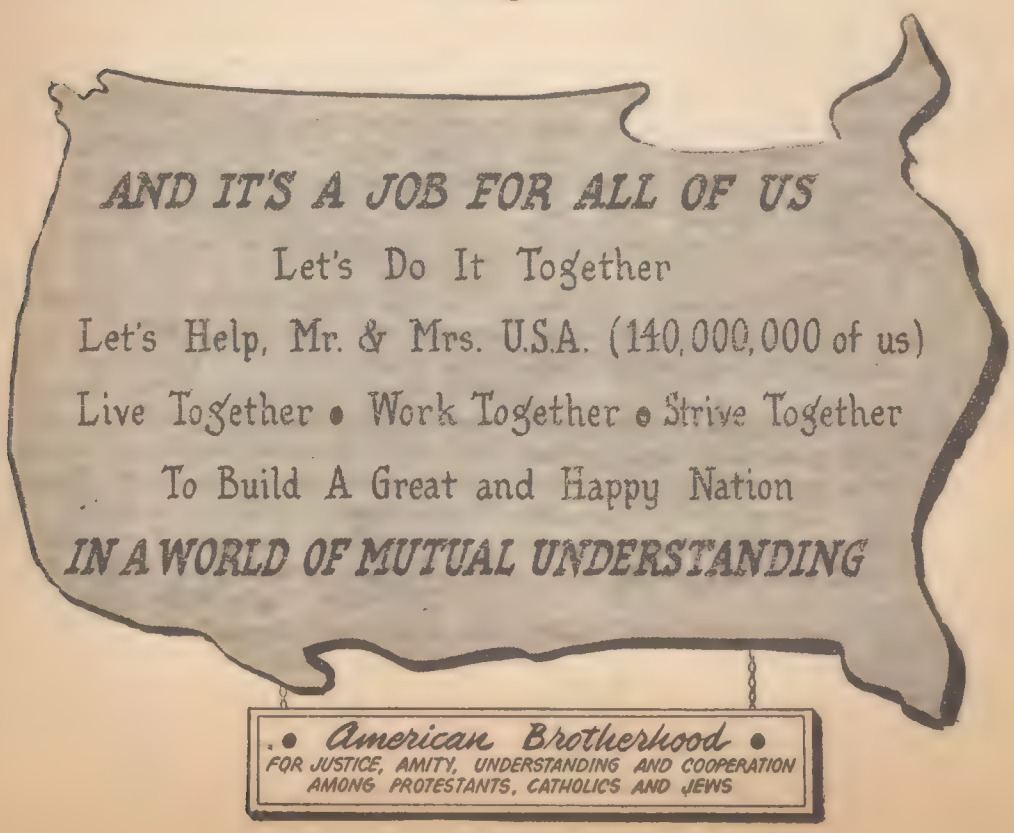
They rode a mile in from the mouth of the canyon, where Russ Hobbs had died. Reaching a point where the walls began to narrow, they climbed a rise. Spread out before them was the lushly grassed canyon floor, dotted with grazing cattle. Here and there Clate could make out the fallen, decomposed form of a cow. Without looking, he knew that their tongues and unborn calves had been removed.

"It won't always be like this," he told Jeanette, as they sat their saddle, close together. "Someday this is going to be the greatest cattle country in the west."

The resolute, brown eyes of Jeanette moved slowly over the scene. "No conquered land can ever be great without women, Clate," she replied. "The great cattle herds you dream of will pass just like the thinning-out buffalo, unless you men establish permanent homes, not merely dugouts and roving chuck-wagons. Homes with women and children in them —to keep you men here. Then your Texas will become great."

"You're a fit woman for this Texas, Jeanette," he told her. "Will you stay—and help keep me here?"

Her eyes twinkled and she leaned closer to offer Clate her lips. "Why do you think I ever left that schoolroom in Philadelphia?"



Doan could wait no longer. Praying for a steady hand, he raised his one pistol and fired. What happened after that came all at once . . .

TRIAL BY TOMAHAWK

By DE WITT NEWBURY

Paleface palaver would hoop no scalps for Shawanoe braves. So John Doan knew Penelope and Old David were fixin' for a forest massacre!

IT WAS a strange home-coming for John Doan.

He had been anxious through the past weeks— those ominous June weeks of 1763— while his business dragged to a conclusion. Free at last, he had spared neither horseflesh nor his own wiry body; had hardly pulled rein between Harris's Ferry and Carlisle.

Disquieting reports had reached Philadelphia, but nothing had prepared him for Carlisle. The little frontier settlement was swarming with folk from the back country. Refugees crammed blockhouse and cabins, destitute families were sheltering in every barn and shed, camping in the near-by fields.

The town was in a whirl of confusion. Armed men argued and swore. Women searched for missing kin. Stray children wandered forlornly. All were upset by the sudden shock of war.

Doan had hoped to find Penelope and her father safe in town. He didn't find them, and his heart sank more and more as he threaded the crowded streets, knocked on doors, inquired at the two small taverns. He heard news enough, never what he wished to hear.

People talked— feverishly or bleakly— of kinfolk killed, homes destroyed. When he spoke of his own home and neighbors, the answer was a shake of the head. Or worse.

"The folks at Crooked Run haven't come in." "The Quaker and his girl were murdered, sure." "You were lucky to be away when the hatchets struck!"

Doan didn't think himself lucky. He cursed the business that had called him from home. He cursed old Howell's stubbornness, too, that had endangered his daughter.

And when he asked for help, for a scouting party, he was refused. "The woods are full of savages," they said. "Every rifle is needed here." We must stand by our women and children. There's only a handful of soldiers!"

The last man told him, "Ye'd better see the colonel."

He should have done so at first, Doan knew now. He left his bay mare feeding in a tavern yard and hurried off afoot. To the military camp behind the town.

The camp was a sorry sight. The few tents were smartly aligned; but shabby and patched, the headquarters tent no better than the others. A sentry halted him there, a lumpy fellow in the blue facings of the Royal Americans.

The soldier shouted Doan's name, then passed him. And an officer raised his slender height from a table stacked with papers.

Colonel Henry Bouquet was always courteous. He was a well built man with keen, pleasant features and fine gray eyes. Swiss by birth, a soldier of fortune but an able one.

He listened seriously, consulting a closely written list. "These are the known dead, Mr. Doan," he said. "Your friends are not among them."

That was something, of course. It was not enough. "Could you send out a patrol?" Doan asked urgently.

The colonel shook his powdered head. "You have seen my force, sir. Twenty-three rank and file! Most of the 60th are scattered in small garrisons."

He lifted a hand. "However, Sir Jeffrey Amherst promises reinforcements. Two regiments, now on the march from New York. When they arrive you can have your patrol. In the meantime, if you can gather a party of countrymen—"

"I have tried and failed," Doan said bitterly.

Bouquet slapped the table. "And I have been begging for provincial troops. The Assembly will not provide them! It is a strange perversity that refuses arms for defense!"

JOHN DOAN would wait no longer. He led his mare from the tavern yard, mounted and rode for home.

He rode alone. A lean young fellow with clubbed auburn hair and a freckled face. Trying to hope, yet feeling a leaden weight in his breast; as if he carried a bag of bullets there.

He might find the Howells still unharmed, he told himself. Still in their log farmhouse, though cut off from help.

Then he thought of his own new house and mill on Crooked Run; the place where he'd planned to win a livelihood, marry Penelope and rear a family. The buildings were of stone. Perhaps the few neighbors —the Howells and Sladens—had forted there.

The tired mare grew brisker on the homeward way. It led along the Fort Pitt Road, a rough track, crowded by forest. That road had been traveled recently, Doan saw, but only by the fleeing settlers. It was scored by the hoofs of cattle and by cart wheels. A broken powder horn lay here. A child's corncob doll there. A little farther on was a woman's frilled cap, trodden and soiled.

The forest was deadly still. The air shimmered with heat where a sunbeam shone through the arching branches. Doan looked watchfully around him, strained his ears.

He saw a fox trot across the track, a tawny shadow. He heard a squirrel chattering on some bough. That was all.

He was safe enough, he guessed. The war parties had slunk away after striking the first blows. Yet he threw back the skirts of

his linen riding coat to clear his sword. And he loosened the two long pistols in their saddle holsters.

Then a scent of stale smoke and charred wood stung his nostrils. He turned aside to rein up in Connor's clearing.

The savages had been here! Only ashes and a few blackened logs were left of the cabin. But a burial party had risked a visit. There were three hastily mounded graves in the seared dooryard, two already disturbed by wolves.

Doan turned back to the road. Another mile, and he swung into a byway leading north. His own road, the trail to Crooked Run. He grew reckless now and used his spurs. Again and again he choked on that smell of burnt stuff, but didn't stop.

And now the trail wound through rough country, thickly wooded. Up a long, shouldered rise and down. He saw cleared land ahead. The Sladen farm.

He reached it. Cabin and barn were gone, only a split-rail fence remained. And four scarecrows?

No. Four bodies were hanging in a row across the fence. Like the carcasses of game, or as if hung there for a grim joke. The biggest was Tom Sladen, the old one his father. The smaller two were his sons. All had been scalped. Their clotted heads pointed toward the trail, each in a halo of flies.

They had been hoeing corn when caught. Perhaps a week ago.

The mare shied and shivered, and Doan's breath stuck in his throat. He spurred past, eyes averted lest he see what was left of the Sladen women. A sick thought of Penelope was in his mind. Had some red hand taken her yellow hair?

He galloped on through the valley, his own land. Until the woods opened on the left and he saw the sliding stream, the stone buildings at its edge. The mare slackened. He spurred her again, scarcely glanced at his house and mill. Only noted, uncaring, that both were roofless.

The Howell farm lay half a mile down creek. Doan came to a grainfield first, with shocks of wheat all moldy and spoiled. Then a cabbage plantation, choked with weeds. And then he jumped his mare over a dead cow—a wolf-torn lump—and pulled rein where the farmhouse should have stood, under sugar maples.

The maples were blighted brown. The house was not there. Nor were the barns, the sheds, the tenant cabins.

Doan swung down from his heaving mare. Tight-lipped, he surveyed the desolation, searched through burned litter. He found no trace of what he had dreaded to find.

Father and daughter had been taken alive. Carried off...

As he rode back up the valley, Doan thought of his last visit to that vanished house. It was to say good-bye before his journey; an ill-timed journey, but necessary to secure final title to his land.

"Come to Philadelphia with me," he had urged. "Or at least Carlisle, until the unrest has quieted."

Howell had shaken his head of rough, frosted curls. A sturdy fellow, old David, with convictions sturdier than his frame. "Friends needn't fear the Indians! Thee knows how often I have fed and lodged them. And that Neppaug-wese, the Night Walker, calls me his brother."

"It's a way they have," Doan had frowned, "until something nettles them."

The Quaker had smiled, a wise look—it seemed foolish to Doan—on his plain face. "They'll not harm us who have always treated them well. I can't leave the farm, John. My laborers have run away, as have thee's own mill hands. I must tend crops as best I may, with Penelope to help."

Doan had turned to the girl then, his glance dwelling on her bright cheeks and the yellow hair that would never stay sleeked. On her round, firm arms, the small hands that were so skilled at churning butter.

She had crinkled her lips and said, "Father is right."

"He should send you away, at least," Doan had protested.

She had given him a tranquil gaze. "When I am wedded to thee, John, I will owe thee duty. Until then my duty is to Father."

So they had stayed at home, sure that savages were kindly folk, loyal to their friends. A faith that seemed sheer folly to John Doan.

True, that was early in June, and the Indian trouble had not fairly started. There were only a few rumors. Of Lake Country

tribes stirred up by the Ottawa chief, Pontiac. Of Fort Detroit threatened, and of a gathering around Fort Pitt.

But now, a month later, war had broken out in dead earnest. All the Pennsylvania tribes had risen, too. Even the Delewares who had been docile for so long. They had cut off Fort Pitt, besieged every small garrison. They had swept the back country, scalping and burning. The whole frontier was a waste...

Doan glanced toward the sun, low behind the forested hills. He touched the mare with a spur and lapsed into thought again. If the Howells were captives, there was hope. Captives could be rescued or ransomed.

Where had they been taken? To one of the Deleware towns on the upper Juniata River, likely. And Night Walker was the sachem of Shaningo. Perhaps he would really help white friends.

The other Indian towns lay farther west. Those of the Shawanoes; and the Mingoes, scattered bands of Iroquois blood and speech.

The mare was a good beast. It was not yet dark when she reached the Fort Pitt Road. But Doan had neglected to be watchful. Thinking of Penelope and her father, he had forgotten any danger to himself.

He was roused from abstraction as he reined into the wider track. Roused abruptly by the thudding sound of a musket shot. It came from somewhere to the west; and a moment later came another.

Doan halted. Should he spur for Carlisle? Or scout toward the firing? As he paused, uncertain, he heard the pounding of feet. A man lurched into sight, running heavily down the road.

A soldier, a Royal American. Hatless and weaponless, his faded red coat blotched with a darker color. He ran with greater effort when he saw Doan, panted up to clutch a stirrup.

"Save my papers!" he choked. "They shot my horse—they shot me!" His hand slipped from the stirrup and he fell face down on the rutted road.

Doan dismounted quickly and bent over him. Yes, the man was dead, with a ball through his body. An express rider.

There were dispatches in that slung leather pouch. Doan was reaching for it when something—a swift, padding sound—made him look up. In the nick of time! He saw a painted face, slitted black eyes under a feathered topknot. He saw a swinging hatchet.

His pistols were still in their holsters. He flung himself back, crouching, and whipped out his sword. It was no small-sword, but a stout horseman's blade.

The Mingoe spitted himself. He had leaped, and couldn't stop in mid-air. The sword went through belly and back. And then the oiled, threshing body knocked Doan flat, smothered him with a reek of bear grease. The hatchet struck his head; though without force, hardly cutting his stiff hat.

He rolled the dead savage away and struggled up. His mare was at the roadside, snorting and pawing. He reached her in a couple of strides, drew a pistol and cocked it. There had been two musket shots. Two Indians!

The second Mingoe was bounding down the road, yelling. His whoops were a barbarous gobbling, *"Ko-hai! Ko-hai!"*

Luckily, he hadn't reloaded his musket. He stopped short as Doan raised the pistol, spun and dove for the bushes. Doan fired just as he disappeared. Fired with steady arm.

A commotion stirred the undergrowth. A moccasined foot jerked out, kicked and lay still.

COLONEL Bouquet broke the seal and spread out the letter. "From my countryman, Captain Ecuyer, at Fort Pitt." He bowed slightly to Doan. "You deserve to hear the news, having brought it. The first to come through for a week."

He read, smiling. "The garrison holds securely, well victualed and with little sickness. The enemy fires on the fort daily from both forest and river banks, but to small effect. Only one man killed, nine wounded."

Suddenly his face changed. He leaned forward, biting his lip. "Perdition! A postscript with later news. *C'est tres malheureux!* The upper posts are lost.. Presque Isle, Le Boeuf, Venango—all have been burned. Our men slaughtered or taken, God help them!"

Bouquet rose and paced about the small tent. "Wooden blockhouses!" he muttered. "I have begged for stone walls and slate roofs. But Bedford and Ligonier still hold.

They must be relieved at once. Delay is maddening!"

Doan had listened silently. It was black news indeed. Of lost lives and broken defenses. The tribes would be bolder than ever now, harder to deal with. What could a civilian say to that?

Perhaps something. He stepped forward with a question. "Colonel, will you march into the Indian country?"

The colonel stopped his pacing. "My orders are not secret. I will relieve Fort Pitt and the smaller posts, and engage the enemy."

"I'd like to march with you, sir," Doan said. "I served in the French war when only a lad. As a ranger."

Bouquet's gloomy face brightened a little. "Why, you can very useful, Mr. Doan, knowing the locality and the people. If you will volunteer as my aide."

He sat down again. "Two regiments should be here soon, the 77th and the 42nd, the Highlanders, under Major Campbell. In the meantime I have but three junior officers, and work for a dozen. I must procure provisions of all kinds. I must hire carts and horses, with men to drive them." He cleared his throat.

Doan was satisfied. He would go with the army, to fight, to search for Penelope, and until then would be too busy for much thinking.

He was busy. For two weeks he scoured the countryside, the settled land to the eastward, spending the king's gold. Bargaining with tight-fisted farmers, and often obliged to threaten or cajole.

Meanwhile the two regiments arrived at Carlisle. He was dismayed when he saw them. They were only skeleton regiments, less than five hundred men in all. His Majesty's forces had been sadly reduced since the peace with France.

The Highlanders were hardy enough, and made a brave showing in their tartans. But the grenadiers of the 77th had just come from the West Indies. They were gaunt and yellow-faced, racked with fever. "These men are not fit for service!" Bouquet stormed. "Half should be in hospital!"

"They slawed the march," Major Campbell reported dourly. "But I was ordered to bring ilka man." The major was a veteran with a hard eye and a brandy nose.

Bouquet swore a foreign oath. "Tail of the devil! I'll leave them as reliefs at Bedford and Ligonier."

Finally, after weeks of preparation, the little army was ready. It broke camp and began the march. A wonderful sight for the country people as it tramped through Carlisle. They cheered the grenadiers with their tall caps and glittering bayonets, they gaped at the bare-legged Highlanders guarding the long line of carts.

But John Doan was wiser. He thought of the sixty men riding in the wagons, too weak to march. Of the broken regiments; only two companies each of the 77th and 42nd, barely a platoon of the 60th.

And, against his will, he thought of General Braddock's disaster in this same wilderness. The bones of his slaughtered troops—a greater army than this—were still lying in the forest near Fort Pitt.

Doan marched near the head of the column and carried his own baggage; a haversack and a duffle blanket. The mare had been left safely with a farmer.

He had bought a deerskin shirt to replace his riding coat, but kept his horseman's boots. They were good for bogs and briers, though they made his feet sweat.

The midsummer heat was the worst trouble at first. The grenadiers suffered under the weight of heavy uniforms and Tower muskets. The Scots were better at rough marching, being used to mountains. Yet somehow they made poor flankers. The unfamiliar forest seemed to bewilder them.

As Bouquet complained, "I cannot send a Highlander into the woods without losing him!"

Campbell was mortified. "Hoots toots!" he said. "The laddies will learn! This is na' like deer-stalking in the heather."

"We must have rangers," the colonel declared. "To proceed without them is to invite an ambush."

THE ARMY wound its laborious way through the Cumberland Valley, to the higher country. Bivouacking at night, forted behind the wagons. Seeing no sign of the enemy except deserted clearings and burned cabins.

They had expected a brush at Fort Bedford. They were disappointed. All the besiegers decamped at their approach; but

Captain Ourry, post commander, welcomed them very gladly.

He had fought off three Indian attacks, he reported. His regular garrison numbered only three corporals and nine privates. But a good many outlying settlers had fled to the fort, and he had formed a rifle company of the men.

"These fellows must be bold," Bouquet said. "Perhaps we can employ a few, and save our poor Highlanders. Please see to it, Mr. Doan."

Most of the refugees had flocked outside the stockade to watch the soldiers make camp. Doan pushed among draggled women and ragged children, to a group of lounging, buckskin-shirted men. As he neared them he heard a haranguing voice.

"The snuff-coats are to blame, for pamperin' the red weasels. Wouldn't fight, themselves, nor let anybody else fight. Except Injuns!"

The haranguer was slouching against the log wall. A long, loose woodsman with a hawkish beak on a face as brown as his beard. His rifle leaned beside him, as long as himself.

He waved a hairy paw and went on. "When an Injun killed a white man, he was just a nat'l innocent. They hugged and kissed him! But when a white man killed an Injun, *he* was a cussed murderer of their darlin' red brothers. Yes, sir, and he was hauled to Philadelphia, tried by a Quaker court and hanged in a Quaker noose. No wonder the copper-bellies got onruly!"

He spied Doan and straightened up. "Guess you heard me whooping, Squire," he grinned.

Doan was looking at his bullet pouch, trimmed with wisps of black hair. The man glanced down. "Oh, them scalps! I took 'em in the last war. Ain't grabbed any yet, this war, but I aim to."

"I gathered," Doan said, "that you don't care much for Indians. Or Quakers."

The other nodded. "The Quakers coddle the Injuns, and the Injuns stole my wife. An ugly besom, but the only one I had." He caught Doan's look of sympathy and added, "I found her again."

"So you got her back?" Doan's anxiety for Penelope—it was always present—sharpened suddenly in his breast.

"Not exactly," the woodsman drawled. "After the peace I went seeking through the red towns. I found her in Mohoning, with a half-red brat at her tail. She had married a chief named Keelyuskun."

"Married!" Doan frowned. "Not willingly?"

The woodsman nodded again. "She'd divorced herself, Injun fashion, and married a Delaware. I might ha' fed him a bellyfull of lead, but I didn't. My wife was a sight for sore eyes—to make 'em sore, I mean. So I told her to choose between us, and she chose the chief. I wished her luck and came away."

He winked solemnly. "Just by accident, sort of, a pretty young squaw came away at the same time."

The other men laughed, and one said, "This here is Tobe Gillian. He shoots straighter than he talks!"

"That sounds useful," Doan smiled. "Why not join us, Tobe? Regular pay and rations for you and your friends."

Gillian picked up his rifle. "Now, that sounds useful, too. Reckon I can tole some boys along!"

He was as good as his word. Thirty riflemen enlisted for the campaign.

THE SCOUTS were thrown out ahead and on each flank when the army moved again. Doan felt a bit more confident; though the ghost of Braddock still haunted him as he watched the troops, marching so bravely, yet so few and unused to woodland war.

He talked to Tobe Gillian when the chance came. Told of Penelope and his hope of finding her.

Tobe was not encouraging. "There's scores of towns, and this girl might be held in any. Your best chance is to lick the tribes first, nose around afterwards."

One man could do nothing, Doan was forced to see. All depended on this plodding little column. His impatience grew as it dragged itself along, meeting no worse enemy than weather and the roughness of the road.

It toiled up a huge green rampart, the main ridge of the mountains. Toiled down the steep, zigzag track to lower land. And came to Fort Ligonier on the second day of August.

Every Indian besieger had vanished by that time. The tiny garrison was safe, though nearly starved. The commanding

lieutenant could give no news of Fort Pitt, as no expresses had come through for weeks.

Bouquet decided to move more quickly. The rest of the sick men were left at Ligonier, and so were all the carts. The horses were turned into pack-animals, loaded with what provisions and ammunition they could carry.

Three days later the column wound over Edge Hill, a thinly wooded upthrust amid heavy forest.

It was early afternoon. Camp was to be made at Bushy Run, not far ahead, and the troops were swinging along eagerly. Their canteens were empty. Every man was thinking of a cold mountain stream.

Suddenly the flat, hard crack of a rifle sounded. In the thicketed dip beyond the hill, where the advance guard was heading. The single shot was followed by a scattering of others. Both rifles and muskets were speaking.

An order halted the advance. Doan, at the colonel's elbow, stared into the greenery below. He saw Gillian coming up the slope at a loose-jointed trot.

The scout skirted the column. "Bunch of copper-bellies," he reported, "bushed up on the second rise yonder."

Bouquet held the main column. "Captain Basset," he said politely, "please take your company and dislodge them."

The grenadiers clumped down hill and deployed, then gave a cheer and charged. Doan could see their bayonets flash among the trees, hear their crashing progress up the far slope.

He was listening for more gunfire. It came, but from a different direction. Muskets thudded from the woods on the right.

"They seem to be flanking us," Bouquet observed. He glanced around alertly.

Now a racket of shooting sounded on the left. And now a fusillade from the rear, with a wild yelping of savage voices.

The colonel swore. "Damnation, they're around us! We must fall back and guard the train. Mr. Doan, my compliments to Captain Basset, and he's to bring his men in at once."

Doan left the track and plunged down hill. The fire had died away in front; only a wolfish howling sounded in the distance. Behind him, though, the din of musketry and whooping had increased.

He found the grenadiers drawn up on a ridge, Captain Basset looking indignant. "Ecod!" he complained, "The rascals wouldn't wait for us! Is our main force engaged?"

"A general attack," Doan panted. "You're wanted, sir—with the colonel's compliments."

The company returned in double file. As they mounted Edge Hill a few musket balls whistled between the tall caps. A soldier stumbled forward, shot through the right shoulder. His file-mate hauled him in, heels dragging.

A DEFENSE line had been thrown out to encircle the hilltop. The pack-horses were bunched in the center, their drivers cowering among them. The scouts had come in and were perched amid rocks at the highest point, using their long rifles.

Enemy fire was coming from every side now, with a constant yelping and howling. The troops must be badly outnumbered, Doan thought. He reported to the colonel, who was standing with Campbell. Both officers grave but perfectly calm.

There was no work for him at the moment. He tried his pistols, though they were of little use here. He could see a hundred puffs of smoke spurting from the trees below. Only now and then he glimpsed a capering painted figure.

It was growing hot on the hilltop. A pack-horse reared and screamed, an arrow deep in its haunch. The horse broke loose, knocked a couple of soldiers sprawling, and went galloping into the woods with its load of flour sacks.

Derisive hoots rose from below. A husky voice called out in English, "Sends us food, soldiers! You not need! We cut your throats so can't eat, cut bellies so don't hold!"

Tobe Gillian cursed as he rammed a charge home. "That's Keelyuskun, hell burn him! That's my wife's husband! I know his yawp."

Doan cast an eye about the circle. The men were suffering. A big grenadier tumbled backward, his cap falling from a smashed forehead. A Highlander gaped at his left arm, suddenly dripping red, then clamped his musket between his knees to load one-handed. A dozen dead lay in the lines; and nearly twenty wounded had been

carried to the safest place, near the rocks.

The troops swept the forest with volley after volley, but most of the bullets seemed to be hitting trees. Again and again Bouquet ordered a charge, from one side of the circle or another. The Indians ran like deer before the bayonets, came back like hunting wolves when the sortie retired.

At last the colonel beckoned to Doan. "We must strengthen defenses," he said. "Find every company officer, if you please, and have details set to work under covering fire. They must fell trees, heap stones, throw up earthworks. Then have the drivers unload the flour sacks and pile them around our wounded. *Peste!* If we only had water!"

A wise order, but bad news. It meant that Bouquet had lost hope of breaking through the enemy. The fight would be a wearing siege.

And thirst was the worst trouble. It gnawed at every man's throat. It was bad enough for the fellows who fought through the long, sweltering afternoon, choking in powder smoke. Worse, much worse for the wounded.

Most of the tools had been left with the wagons, but the few axes, picks and spades were used. Sweating soldiers chopped and dug, often struck by bullet or arrow as they worked. Until the defenders could kneel behind a low, uneven barrier.

The hilltop was still open to fire; and red marksmen had climbed the surrounding trees. They caused terrific confusion when they shot the horses. The brutes would fall, rolling and kicking, or break free and run wild.

Gillian and his riflemen dropped some harassers from their roosts like birds, but couldn't reach them all.

So the grim day wore to a close. The fighting stopped at nightfall, and a strange quiet seemed to breathe from the forest. Doan could have believed, almost, that the enemy had stolen away.

But there were uneasy sounds inside the camp. Suffering horses stamped and whinnied. Wounded men moaned or cried out in fever. The cry was always for water; and there was no water.

The wounded numbered sixty now, the dead nearly thirty. Of the officers, Captain McIntosh had been killed by an arrow. Blond young Lieutenant Dow had a ball between his ribs, Graham a broken thigh.

The troops lay on their arms; while the colonel sat by a sheltered lantern and wrote a report for the Commander in Chief. There seemed small chance of it ever reaching Sir Jeffrey Amherst in New York!

DOAN WAKED from sodden sleep on the bare ground. Dawn was creeping into the beleaguered camp.

Most of the men were still lying behind their ragged earthworks. The guards had an outlandish look, with their bloodshot eyes and unshaved faces, blackened by powder smoke. The sleeping Highlanders lay like so many dead men, each with a plaid over his head.

The surrounding forest was utterly quiet. Until a hoarse voice began to shout. The same voice that had mocked before.

"Remember Braddock!" it said. "He was big chief, had many Red Coats. Where they all now?"

The soldiers were waking. Highlanders throwing off their plaids to start up wildly, grenadiers heaving themselves stiffly, groaning with cramp.

A round thing came flying over the earthworks, rolled along the ground and came to rest. A bleached skull.

"Braddock's man!" the voice cried. "You all be like him soon!"

The mocker was at the foot of the slope, behind a tree. He slipped to the next tree; and Doan saw a coppery form, striped with vermilion, leaping like a big cat.

Tobe Gillian bellowed. "Keelyuskun again! I'll nail his hide!"

The rifle spat, but the Delaware chief was safely hidden. From behind his tree he cursed the Englishmen, hurling every bad name he had learned from traders. He ended with a long-drawn howl. It was echoed by others. Muskets began to bank and smoke from the woods. And so commenced another day of battle.

Doan made a tour of the lines and rejoined the colonel. All points were firm, he reported, the men a little freshened by rest and the cool of morning.

"Will you come with me, sir?" he added. "I have something to show you."

That something seemed important to him. The colonel noted his repressed excitement, agreed at once. They went to the southern line, where Doan stopped and pointed.

A rain-washed gully angled down into the woods. Painted bodies lay sprawled along its bottom.

Bouquet looked. "We've bagged some of the rogues, at least."

Captain Basset stepped up. "Yes, sir. The fools tried a surprise while the loud-mouthed one was blackguarding us."

"Ah, they are growing bolder," Bouquet answered.

Doan touched his arm. "Don't you see it, Colonel? Yonder cut is no help to the savages, as our fire covers it. But to ourselves? For a sally at the right time?"

For an instant Bouquet stared down the hill, his keen face growing keener. "You should be in command, Mr. Doan," he said, "not I!"

He turned and made for the western line. Moving with nervous energy, unflinching when a ball sang close. Major Campbell was sitting behind a hummock. Bouquet and Doan dropped beside him.

"My poor birkies canna eat dry rations," Campbell complained. "Some ha'e chawed bits o' horseflesh, for the moisture in it." He jerked out a hand. "The enemy seem to be massing here."

Bouquet nodded thoughtfully.

"Today will end the business," Campbell growled, "ane way or anither."

"No doubt," Bouquet smiled as he rose. "They'll make a rush, sooner or later, to break our lines." His eyes met Doan's. And both glances were full of understanding.

The colonel went to the highest ground. Refusing to take shelter, he stood surveying the lines and the forest. Beside him, Doan felt like the tethered bird at a turkey shoot, and envied the soldiers with their answering muskets.

About midmorning Bouquet tapped his shoulder. "It is nearly time. They are gathering—they are certainly gathering on our front."

It was true. A few shots and whoops still came from other quarters, but most of the clamor was from the west.

"Quickly now!" the colonel ordered. "My compliments to Major Campbell. If the Indians seem inclined to rush, he must draw them on. He must hold his fire as if out of powder. When they come on, he is to withdraw his two companies to our center.

"Then compliments to Captain Basset. Half the grenadiers must cover our broken front. 'Twill be a thin line, yet it must hold. The other company and the rangers—"

Doan hardly waited for Bouquet to finish before he was away at a run. In a few minutes he was back again. His blood had quickened; he felt a strength that made nothing of hunger and thirst.

"Colonel!" he pleaded, "May I go with the Highlanders? I haven't yet struck a good blow!"

Bouquet looked at him gravely. "You have done more, Mr. Doan. If the day is saved, you have saved it." Then he laughed. "You may go. If our stratagem fails, I'll no longer need an aide."

Once more at the western line, Doan swept the woods with eager eyes. He saw a movement among the trees. A color-daubed body, a grimacing face here and there. For the first time the Indians were showing themselves in numbers. The Highlanders cursed them in Gaelic, but only a few fired.

And now the hot muskets were silent altogether, and more and more warriors were creeping into sight, dancing at the edge of the forest, waving weapons and yelling.

One pranced out before the others, screaming an oration. A tall devil with owl feathers in his scalp-lock and striped with vermilion from head to foot.

He was answered with ear-splitting shrieks.

And the whole savage swarm swept out of the woods.

DELAWARES, Shawanoes and Mingoes, all mixed together. All stripped for war. Shaved and feathered, daubed with red and black, green and yellow. Doan had never seen such a barbarous array, even in his ranging days.

Campbell trumpeted an order. It had a strange effect! The Highlanders gave way, running and staggering back with a flutter of kilts. Still without firing a shot. A few muskets banged on either side, as grenadiers ran to hold the broken line.

The confusion of panic carried Doan along. It was so real that it almost fooled him. The Scots went back, back. Until the circle was only a half-circle; and he knew that the savages were whooping up hill to shatter that.

But the half-circle turned into a crescent with sharp horns.

Once away from the crumpled line, the confusion straightened as if by magic. The Highlanders formed column and went trotting across the hill. Then down again—down that long, corpse-strewn gully that angled into the woods.

Doan kept a pace behind the major. He was ready when the column faced right into line, scrambled up a bank and delivered a crashing volley.

He fired both pistols, then wrenched out his sword.

The Indian pack had received every ball of the volley. They were tumbling back from their assault, the dead, wounded and unhurt all stirred in a dreadful red pottage. Some turned against this new attack. But the Scots were wielding their bayonets now, screaming more wildly than the savages, and nothing could stop them.

The pack burst into yelping fragments and fled northward. Until another volley roared! Grenadiers and rangers had flanked them, too.

Those doubly blasted fragments fled westward then. The Englishmen cheered, Scots yelled, and both showed how dogs of war could chase red wolves.

The charge went far through the forest. The bayonets spitting red backs, nailing red carcasses to the ground. To John Doan it was a swift, violent dream of looming trees and shaking boughs, of trampling feet and hideous outcries. Of striking again and again at bounding, squalling animals.

He realized that victory was complete. Braddock's ghost was laid at last. Fort Pitt would be relieved, the enemy subdued . . .

But now he stood alone. He had come too fast, too far. Behind him the Highlanders were probing the thickets for lurkers.

Before him was nothing but wilderness, emptied of foes.

No, something moved yonder. Some crouching thing. He ran on again, and stopped. One of the scouts was squatting over a dead Indian, a big naked body striped with vermilion.

Tobe Gillian was laughing. His shoulders shook as he used his scalping knife. "It's Keelyuskun!" he said, "And my wife's a widow!"

The woodsman tucked the hank of coarse hair in his belt and pointed his knife. "D'ye sniff it, Squire?"

There was smoke in the air. A sour, acrid taint.

"Injun fire," Tobe said. "Burnt bones and grease in it. Come on! We'll strike their camp before the soldiers, maybe find some pickings." He thrust two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

Bushes rustled and sticks snapped as other rangers came racing. Seven men, every one with scalps dangling from his belt.

Tobe caught up his rifle and waved them on. "The Injun camp, boys! Right ahead, north-west. Foller the smoke!"

They went, crashing and tearing through the woods. With no attempt at stealth; speed was the thing. Doan strained wind and limb, yet he was last to reach the clearing.

The others were poking into the low bark and brush shelters with their rifle barrels, breaking them apart and scattering the litter. Tobe snatched a greasy blanket, threw it down, then upset an iron kettle with his foot. "They've sneaked off, the red weasels," he said. "Left naught but rubbish."

He strode to the edge of the clearing, where two trees stood side by side, and suddenly raised a shout. "Tarnal fire! They're had white prisoners here! One a woman!"

It was true. Doan saw the rubbed bark, where bound bodies had pressed. He saw the cut thongs lying at each tree-foot, where they had fallen. He saw a woman's shoe.

He felt dazed and dizzy as he held it in his hand. A stout little shoe, now cracked and worn. It could be—it could be—!

But how could Penelope be there? When she had been captured so far away?

He stopped thinking of that. He dared not hope, but he could act. He stowed the shoe in the breast of his hunting shirt and turned to Gillian. "None of ours could have freed them?"

The scout shook his head. "'Twas a few copper-bellies that scampered back this way. Their trail will be plain enough. You foller it, Squire! Be sly, though; they'll tomahawk the whites if pressed too hard."

The other rangers had crowded up, and Tobe spoke to them. "Flanking's the game

today. We'll flank again, right and left."

Without another word the men separated, four and four. Each party plunged into the forest and vanished noiselessly. There were no tearing, pounding feet now!

Left solitary, Doan charged his remaining pistol; he had dropped the other somewhere. Then he pushed on. Across the clearing and away.

Tobe had been right. The Indians were in flight, careless of traces. Doan read them as he ran. A furrow in the moss, a torn vine. Leaves knocked from a low branch, broken twigs. And here were moccasin prints in a soggy spot.

He lost track of time and distance. The scouts would stop the savages, he thought, or overtake them and close in. Then danger to white captives! He panted, burning up with anxiety.

A big tree had fallen here, tearing up the ground. The Indians were huddled against the mass of upturned roots. And at one side, backs against the raw earth, sat two prisoners.

At first Doan's eyes were all for them. Old David—and Penelope!

They were here, however they had come! Sitting hand in hand. The girl with closed eyes, face very white and tired. Gown in tatters, hair tangled on her shoulders—the bright hair that would never stay sleek. Old David's face was as rugged and calm as ever, though his shoulders sagged. He was coatless; an Indian had the Quaker coat.

They were all Shawanoes; he counted eleven. All had been in the fighting, from their sweat-smeared paint and clotting blood. One was wearing Howell's brown coat, his legs looking oddly thin under the full skirts. Another was an old man with thews like leather cords.

What now, Doan wondered? His pistol was cocked and ready. He had one bullet and his sword. Not enough! He must take no chances, must wait for the rangers.

The Shawanoes were talking. Their voices came up in a guttural murmur, and in a language he could understand.

One said, "We must go forward. The Red Coats are behind us." He was a young brave with a wound scored in his side.

"The Men-dressed-as-women are coming, too," another said. "They are devils."

The old warrior clutched a squirrel-skin pouch that hung on his chest and held the medicine bag to his ear. "Brothers," he muttered, "my *mantiou* tells us to scatter, each to run in a different direction. We will do this and some of us shall live. But first I will kill the captives."

He stood up, a gaunt-ribbed specter in a mask of black paint, and raised a stone maul.

Doan could wait no longer. Praying for a steady hand, he aimed his one pistol.

What happened then came all at once. The lean Shawanoe fell in a writhing heap of bare limbs, paint and feathers. The others bolted from the hollow like beasts routed out of a den. To be met by a crackle of rifle fire.

Doan jumped down to kneel beside Penelope.

That was a calm meeting. A peaceful meeting, there in the battle-seared forset! The Quaker maid didn't cry out. She neither wept nor fainted away. With one hand still clasping her father's, she simply gave John Doan the other. But her face was suddenly full of light and life.

Old David was smiling his wise smile.

"I was right, John!" he declared. "'Twas as I told thee! Our captors carried us unharmed to Shaningo, and the chief, Neppaug-wese, ordered our release. He sent us to Fort Pitt with a trusty guide."

Doan had taken Penelope's lost shoe from its hiding place. He paused to ask, "And the Shawanoes caught you?"

"Why, those poor, ignorant creatures don't know Friends. They met us in the woods and quarreled with our Delaware. Yet we'd have won them over, but for this warfare, with the soft answer that turneth away wrath."

"A bullet is the best answer," Doan frowned. He bent to put the shoe on a bare foot. A small foot, scratched and bruised.

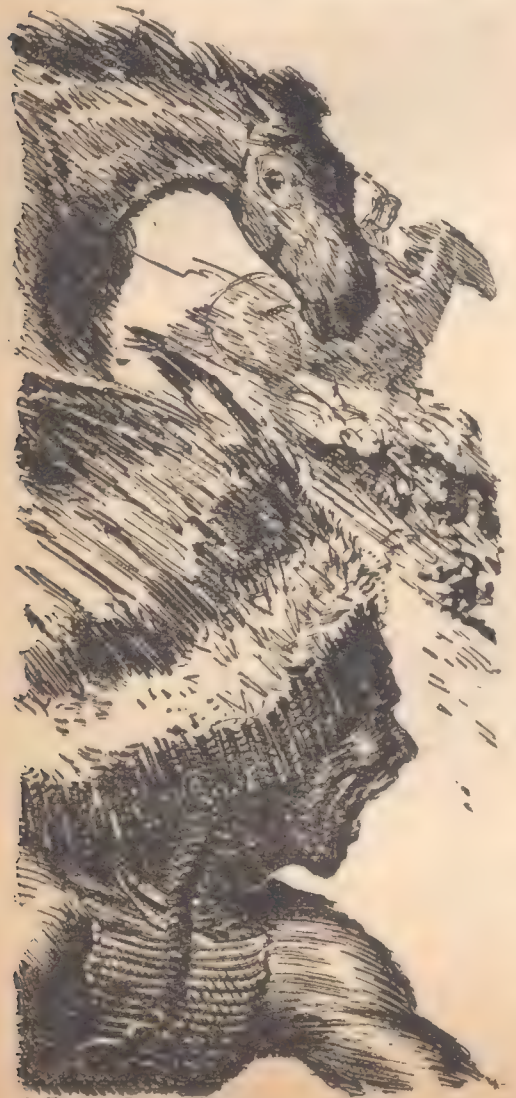
Penelope slipped her arm around his neck. "Father is right," she whispered. "But thee is right, too!"

Gunsmoke On The Arrow

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

Rank-proud Major George Brandon led his troops down a redskin glory-trail. And only a renegade shavetail knew that trail ended in bloody Sioux massacre on the open prairie!

HE STOOD in front of headquarter's window looking out across the parade grounds where Troop "A", was drilling. He watched horses and jaunty troopers in short blue cavalry jackets, gray with dust now, blue pants with the yellow stripe down the sides, forage caps, sabers banging on the left side, carbines suspended from belt swivels on the right.



At the desk behind him, Lieutenant Kern Malloy, Fifth United States Cavalry, heard the pen of Major George Brandon scratching foolscap paper, and then the light step of the orderly leaving the room after the pen stopped scratching.

Gray eyes hard, and a certain tightness in his lips, Kern came around. He looked straight into George Brandon's black eyes —the handsomest eyes at Fort McLane.

Major Brandon sat behind his desk, a cigar in his mouth, smoke curling up toward the log rafters of the ceiling. Brandon was smiling around the cigar, a good-looking man, a wave in his long black hair, straight Roman nose, a well-shaped mouth. He hadn't changed much in the ten years since they'd graduated from the Academy together. He could still have passed as a 'shavetail' just up from the Point, but this hot mid-summer's afternoon out on the barren Dakota plains he was Major Brandon, acting commander of Fort McLane.

Brandon's voice was soft, cultured. "What do you think, Kern?" he asked.

Now, with the orderly out of the room, it was 'Kern', and not Mr. Malloy. It was 'Kern' the way it had been at school, and riding together as Second Lieutenants just graduated from the Point, riding for General Sheridan in the 'Wilderness'.

Kern Malloy said quietly, "Bowman believes there are nearly a thousand Indians within ten miles of Fort McLane."

"Some of our Crows just came in," George Brandon pointed out. "They've seen a few scattered war parties—a hundred, two hundred. They could be heading south to raid Kiowa ponies."

"They wouldn't be coming so close to the post if that were true," Kern said. "They'd give us a wide berth."

"You think they mean trouble?" Brandon asked softly, and the light was in his eyes again—the light Kern Malloy did not like to see. George Brandon had been his best friend—back at the Point, through four years of bloody warfare between the States, another four years, a rather dull four years, in Indian Territory. He knew Brandon—knew the things that were going on inside his head. He could almost see the wheels turning.

Kern didn't answer right away, and Major Brandon went on coolly, thoughtfully, "Wouldn't you think, Kern, that Sioux warparties hanging around in the vicinity of the post called for—for a show of strength?"

Kern Malloy's eyes flickered, and an old saber cut across his left shoulder, sustained in the shambles of Shiloh, began to ache, and these were the only indications that he'd once again read George Brandon's mind. He'd read it also two days before when the word came that Colonel Lawrence, in command at Fort McLane, had suddenly been stricken ill and would have to leave for the east for a possible operation, thus putting Major Brandon in temporary command of the strategic post on the border of the Indian country and along the line of the Bozeman Trail.

Brandon had been chafing at the bit ever since he'd been assigned to Fort McLane. Brandon loved the blare of the bugle and the charge. He liked the smell of gunpowder in his nostrils, and this forced inactivity while the patient Colonel Lawrence tried to parley with the powerful Sioux chieftain, Running Bear, went against his grain.

Back east, at a civic banquet, George Brandon had publicly stated that, 'given three troops of United States Cavalry he could ride through the whole Sioux nation.'

Kern Malloy was thinking about that now, remembering that Brandon had his three troops here at Fort McLane, and that he was in complete command of the post until the War Department got around to appointing another man. It could be weeks before the appointee would reach McLane, and the Sioux were present now, almost encircling the post, hitting at small patrols and wood details, giving occasion for open battle.

"A show of strength," Kern said quietly, "might precipitate open battle, Major." He watched George Brandon puff on the cigar and look through the window, eyes half-closed. Brandon wanted battle very definitely; Brandon wanted to go back east again as a conquering hero. He wanted brevets; he wanted advancement and there had been none since the Big War ceased and the tremendous Grand Army of the Republic was reduced to a handful of soldiers patrolling the wagon trails to California and to Oregon.

George Brandon placed the butt of his cigar in an ash tray and got up. He walked to the window and stood there, watching Troop A, listening to the thud of the horse's hoofs on the hard earth. He said slowly.

"I'd like to ascertain that Running Bear himself is with one of these war parties, Kern. What does Bowman say?"

"He doesn't know," Kern admitted. "He claims the war parties are scattered so as to give the impression that there is not too much strength there."

"My Crow scouts don't know either," Brandon said. "Kern, take Troop A out at dawn tomorrow, proceed as far west as the fork of the Arrow. Keep your eyes open and get back here in less than three days."

"Very good, sir," Kern said. He knew that it was very bad. Brandon was setting the machinery in motion with the intention of taking almost every able-bodied trooper out of McLane to do battle with the Sioux on the open plains—something Colonel Lawrence had avoided ever since the post was constructed. Brandon's 'show of strength' was only a bluff. It would be listed as that in the book, but very definitely it was an invitation to Running Bear that if he wanted his fight he could have it, and George Brandon was hoping fervently that he'd want it!

"Better take young Vernon along," George Brandon advised. "He needs the experience and he's itching to get out of the post."

KERN nodded. He looked down at his hands—big hands, hard hands. He was thinking of Frederick Vernon, just out from the Point, aged twenty-one, Second Lieutenant, and then of all the

other officers, most of them not much more than boys, filled with tales of the Wild West, anxious to have their first tangle with the wily Sioux.

With respect to first class officers, Fort McLane was woefully undermanned. Captain Dilroy had taken Troop "C" along with him as escort to Colonel Lawrence, and Dilroy would not be back for another week. Aside from Lieutenant Redcliffe and himself, Kern realized that George Brandon had no experienced officers under him.

"Good luck to you," Major Brandon said. He reached out then and he slapped Kern's shoulder lightly. He said, "Come back with your hair, Kern."

It was a small gesture, not the act of a commanding officer to a subordinate. It was the sort of thing George Brandon would have done when they were boys together at West Point, and Kern Malloy felt again the old affection for this black-haired man with the amazing war record, Captain of Cavalry at twenty-four, Major at twenty-eight.

Despite Brandon's many weaknesses, his inordinate love of flattery and of the high places, his occasional thoughtlessness, and his twisted, warped view of war as beautiful pageantry, Brandon' heart was good inside. He'd never lorded it over inferiors; he was well-liked at the post. During their student days his unruffled good temper and cheerfulness had brought Kern out of many black moods. Brandon's world was a golden world with a gallant battle at every mile post in the road, with brevets and banquets, with a brave army under his command and a fierce foe in the field.

"Any questions, Kern?" Brandon asked him.

"None, sir," Kern said. He was about to go, and then he paused. He said quietly, "May I congratulate you, Major. I just heard the good news."

That was a lie because he'd heard the news four hours ago, and he'd spent two black hours in his bachelor's quarters along 'Officers' Row', pondering over it, feeling his first real resentment toward George Brandon.

"Thank you," Brandon smiled. He was looking at Kern closely, watching his face for any show of emotion. He said, "I'm very happy that Miss Marjorie consented to marry me, Kern, although I fully believe that she'd have gotten the better man if she'd chosen you."

"All's fair in love and war," Kern said. He smiled with his face, but not with his heart.

Walking along the west border of the parade grounds a few minutes later he thought about this—whether war was fair, whether love was fair. He'd received the bullets, the saber cuts, while George Brandon was getting the brevets and the advancements.

An old army man had once told him that getting ahead in the army consisted of two things—courage, and being in the right place at the right time. He'd possessed the first requisite, but he'd been in an army hospital suffering from a bullet wound in the leg when Lieutenant Brandon made his brilliant foray at Windham Station. He'd been recuperating from a saber cut two years later when Captain Brandon distinguished himself in the bloody affair at Dickson Landing. George Brandon hadn't been scratched in four years of fighting even though his surging ambition and cold courage had carried him into the hottest fighting of every skirmish with the enemy.

And love was not too fair either because he'd met Marjorie Dilroy first, escorting her from Fort Cameron to Fort McLane and the meeting with her father, Captain Dilroy. He'd thought that he'd gotten into her good graces and he'd entertained high hopes until George Brandon arrived from the east after a furlough. Brandon had looks and position. Brandon had always swept women before him. He had a certain dash about him, a gallantry of manner which carried young girls off their feet, even the more serious ones like Marjorie Dilroy.

In the beginning of this whirlwind courtship Kern had been really resentful of Brandon until he'd discovered that the Major was not playing another game, but was actually serious about the girl. He'd stepped aside then, and Brandon had had a clear field ahead of him. He knew that a girl like Marjorie Dilroy was good for George Brandon—that she would settle him down a little, put a curb on that driving ambition, which would one day

ruin him if he were not careful.

Kern found the scout, Dave Bowman, in his cubby-hole of a room. Bowman, a sour-faced man in buckskins, blackened from the fire of a thousand camps, sat on Kern's cot, pipe in mouth, looking at the floor. He looked at Kern out of pale blue eyes. He was a man who made friends but seldom, a man who kept to himself, but he was often in Kern's room when at the post, and he preferred being attached to Kern's command whenever it went out.

"What did he say?" Bowman asked tersely.

Kern hung his hat on a peg. He sat down on a wicker chair and rubbed his chin.

"I'm taking 'A' troop out tomorrow for reconnaissance," Kern told him.

Bowman puffed at his pipe furiously. "You know what's out there," he growled. "Why is he riskin' hair?"

"He's curious to know if Running Bear, himself, is with one of these war parties."

"Don't make a damn bit o' difference," Bowman observed. "The Sioux are lookin' fer fight. They don't like the wagons crossin' their huntin' grounds chasin' the buffalo. They don't like them damned miners movin' into the Black Hills." When Kern didn't say anything Bowman said, "What happens after you come back?"

"The Major will make a 'show of strength'," Kern said slowly.

"An' what in hell does that mean?" Bowman asked.

"He'll be taking almost the entire Fifth out of the fort," Kern stated. "He'll let the Sioux have a look at us."

Dave Bowman's blue eyes widened and his lower jaw dropped. "Have a look at you!" he gasped. "What does he figure the Sioux will do, run away?"

"I don't know," Kern scowled.

Bowman tapped the ashes out of his pipe savagely. "There's a thousand or fifteen hundred bucks out there," he said grimly, "an' Major Brandon can't ride out o' here with more than three hundred troopers. They ain't runnin' at them odds. Don't the Major know them crooked traders have been handin' out some o' the best guns made back east? The Sioux have better rifles than the army right now."

"We'll hope they won't fight," Kern said.

"Hopin' won't do any good," Bowman snarled. "Colonel Lawrence had the right idea. He wanted to let them cool their heels until the summer was over. They couldn't do a damned thing to us while we're behind these walls. They'll go back to their tepees in the fall an' next summer the army will have more posts along the Trail an' there'll be no trouble."

That, Kern Malloy knew, was exactly the way George Brandon felt about it. There would be no trouble next summer so he had to grasp the bull by the horns this summer or wither on the limb, waiting for officers above him to die or resign so that he could move ahead, and Brandon had never been noted for his patience. George Brandon saw golden opportunity looming up in front of him, and he was wise enough to realize that often it only came once in a lifetime.

IF HE could break the power of the Sioux and capture Running Bear while Colonel Lawrence was away, he would become the darling of the hour. Even the War Department, loathe to buck against the pacifist efforts of the Indian Bureau would welcome this solution to their problems. There was no open war with the Sioux at the present time, but patrols had been fired upon and some troopers killed, and the Sioux were out in force, most of them young bucks who had never taken a blue-coat's scalp.

"How far you supposed to go with that patrol?" Dave Bowman wanted to know.

"As far as the fork of the Arrow," Kern said.

Bowman laughed mirthlessly. "You'll never git near the Arrow," he said confidently. "They'll jump you before you're ten miles away from the post walls."

"I have 'A' Troop," Kern said thoughtfully. "The best outfit in the Fifth."

"An' it's damn lucky you do," Bowman told him. "Them boys will fight their way right through hell. Any other troop I'd say would lose half their men."

Across the parade grounds Kern could still hear "A" Troop drilling under young Vernon. "A" Troop consisted largely of veterans from the Big War — veterans

from both sides, men, also, who had been engaged in Indian wars for a long time, against the Comanches and the Kiowas to the south. They would not crack at the first wild charge of the Sioux.

Kern Malloy got up and walked to the doorway. The gray-horse troop was just coming off the parade grounds, moving through the gate toward the stables. Frederick Vernon had dismounted and an orderly was walking his horse after the departing troop. Vernon swung along 'Officers' Row', slapping dust from his uniform. His face had taken on a reddish-tan in the few weeks since he'd been at the post. He looked younger than twenty-one. Kern had heard that he came from a well-to-do Boston family, but the army had called him and he'd listened to the call.

Frederick Vernon grinned and lifted a hand to Kern as he went by. Kern called him over.

"I'm taking out Troop 'A' at dawn," he said quietly. "Major Brandon has requested that you go with me." He hadn't particularly liked the idea because Vernon had never seen any wild Indians with the exception of the despicable specimens who sometimes hovered in the shadow of the post walls. He had no doubt now that there would be fighting on the morrow because Dave Bowman had never guessed wrong before, and he did not like Vernon to receive his baptism of fire with the odds so heavy against them.

Vernon's blue eyes lighted up. "Action at last," he grinned. "I'm beginning to rust here, Mr. Malloy."

"You'll rust no more," Dave Bowman muttered behind Kern.

"We're taking supplies for three days," Kern stated. "Three hundred rounds of ammunition per man."

Frederick Vernon whistled. "That sounds like trouble, Mr. Malloy," he said.

"We hope it's not," Kern told him dryly. "I believe we will get by with two supply wagons."

"Very good, sir," Vernon said. He moved along and there was a certain bounce and spring to his step. His head was held higher and his shoulders were taut as if he were going across the wind-above the Hudson and not along the dry, swept parade grounds at the Point high dusty 'Officers' Row' of the tiny Fort McLane, Indian Territory.

"He still thinks it's a damned game," Bowman muttered. "He'll find out."

Kern nodded. He had no love of war himself. Fighting was sometimes a necessary evil and it had to be done, but he'd never gotten any joy out of it. Soldiering was his trade—the only one he'd ever known. The protection of the frontier was a necessity.

An hour before retreat Kern walked through the gate to the cavalry yard, and then down past "B" stables to the mechanics shop at the northeast corner of the post. The shop was a long shed open on one side. Three carpenters were working on a huge supply wagon, putting another floor on top of the first one, reinforcing the undergirding, inserting heavier wheel axles.

A grizzled sergeant was supervising this work, sitting on a sawbuck, pipe in mouth. He came to attention when Kern came up, his right hand rising smartly, the pipe disappearing.

Kern glanced at the new Gatling gun peeking out from beneath its tarpaulin in one corner of the shed. He said to the sergeant,

"How soon will she be ready, Crowley?"

Sergeant Crowley watched the sweating carpenters up on the rebuilt wagon.

"They figure another day, Lieutenant," he said. "We'll have the gun up on the wagon bed tomorrow morning. It'll take a lot of bolting to keep her steady."

Kern nodded. The mounted Gatling gun was his own pet project on which he'd persuaded Colonel Lawrence to give him a free hand. The post had been given four Gatlings, the new revolving-barreled guns, capable of shooting up to a thousand musket-calibre slugs per minute.

Three of the Gatlings rested on the parade grounds, along with four howitzers, and with these Colonel Lawrence had assured himself he could hold off any Indian attack no matter what the strength.

The fourth Gatling gun was being mounted on a rebuilt supply wagon for service in the field. Colonel Lawrence, immediately before he'd taken sick, had listened to Kern's plan attentively, and then given his approval for Kern to go ahead with his experimental work.

The Gatlings, Kern had reasoned, despite their terrific and deadly fire power, were not ideally suited to Indian warfare. They had to be dragged to the scene of the fight by horse power and then set up in order to operate. In the mobile type of fighting on the western plains, fighting which sometimes covered many miles of territory, the gun was rendered practically useless when the enemy chose to keep out of its range. Every time it was rolled up and placed in position, the Sioux had but to shift the scene of battle, thereby making it as useful as a pea-shooter.

"If we can keep it moving with the attack," Kern had explained to the commanding officer, "and have it firing as we move we can keep the enemy on the run all the time, never giving them the opportunity to make a counter-attack."

He went over to look at the gun now, pulling back the tarpaulin. The Gatling had eight barrels, mounted parallel one to another and spaced about a central shaft around which they rotated. A hand crank operated the shaft, and the rate of fire depended upon the speed with which the crank was revolved. The barrels were loaded by gravity feed from a cartridge container above the barrel.

Walking back to the big wagon Kern called the chief carpenter, a man by the name of Mason. He said,

"Mason, can you make a revolving base for the gun carriage?"

The carpenter scratched his chin. He examined the wagon bed and then the Gatling gun.

He said, "We'll have to knock off the sides, sir."

Kern nodded. "I figured on false sides which can be knocked down every time the gun goes into action," he said. "I'd like this wagon rebuilt after the gun is mounted so that it looks exactly like the other supply wagons, canvas top and all. Put the sides on hinges so that they can be dropped at a moment's notice."

Mason smiled. "Take another day or two for that," he said. "I believe we can do it and have a revolving base."

"Good," Kern said. "If you need any more men let me know." He turned around and he saw Dave Bowman leaning against a corner of the shed, picking his teeth with a sharpened stick.

"That's a hell of a thing," Bowman observed.

"Practical?" Kern asked.

Bowman shrugged. "Maybe once," he admitted. "After that the Sioux will be watchin' fer the big wagon loaded with the devils."

"Once," Kern said thoughtfully, "might be enough to repay us for the work."

He had to pass Captain Dilroy's quarters on the way back from the mechanics' shop, and this time he saw Marjorie sitting in the shade of the piazza. He touched his hat and he was going past when the girl called to him. He had not spoken to her in weeks, and he went over hesitantly now.

Marjorie Dilroy was not the "golden-haired beauty of the regiment". Her hair was brown and her eyes were brown. But there was a quiet beauty to her, a certain depth of spirit which had impressed Kern at their first meeting. She was somewhat older than the other single girls at the post, and many of them had looked upon her already as a spinster of twenty-four.

She said banteringly, "I have not seen much of you lately, Lieutenant Malloy."

Kern took off his hat. He put one boot up on the piazza step and stopped there. He was thinking again of the "luck of George Brandon". He said,

"I've been very busy, Miss Dilroy."

The girl nodded. "My father told me of your 'invention,'" she said, "the Gatling gun on a wagon base. How is it working out?"

"It might possibly become a valuable part of army ordnance," Kern stated, "not particularly the Gatling on the wagon base, but some kind of movable weapon with traction of its own and tremendous firing power. The wars of the future will be mobile wars."

Marjorie Dilroy watched his face closely. There had been no enthusiasm in his voice as he said this. She said quietly,

"You don't refer to war with the same spirit I have heard other army men speak of it."

"No," Kern admitted. "I have no love of war."

"Yet you work on an invention which you think might possibly become the most deadly instrument in the army."

Kern Malloy moistened his lips. "When

there is a task to be done," he said, "the army will do it, whether it loves that particular task or not."

The girl was silent for a moment. "I believe I understand," she said. "It's a nice attitude for an army man to take."

"I'd like to congratulate you and the Major," Kern said, changing the subject. "I had intended to do that."

Marjorie Dilroy looked at him steadily. "I'm sure George and I will be very happy," she said.

Kern Malloy looked at the piazza floor. He wondered how many other homes in the post would be happy if George Brandon went through with his foolhardy plan to take his regiment out against the Sioux; he wondered how many broken homes there would be when Brandon came back with his shattered battalion.

There was not much more to say. Kern made his excuses and got back to his room just in time to dress for "retreat".

II

THERE WAS a breeze as the flag went up the pole on the parade grounds. Kern watched it as he sat astride a big gray horse near the west gate. Eighty-eight bronzed, grim-faced troopers, column of twos, sat on their gray horses just inside the gate. Two loaded supply wagons brought up the rear, eight mules to the wagon.

Second Lieutenant Frederick Vernon rode up. He said, "Orders, sir?"

"When we're outside the gate," Kern told him, "count off two dozen men and put them behind the wagons. Those wagons are your concern, Mr. Vernon. I don't want to lose them."

Young Vernon grinned and saluted as he rode away. Kern saw George Brandon striding toward him then, looking critically down the line of troopers.

"All ready, Mr. Malloy?" he asked.

"Ready, sir," Kern said.

"Don't go beyond the fork of the Arrow," George Brandon told him, "and don't force any action with the Sioux. See if you can make a more accurate count than our scouts have thus far given me."

Dave Bowman, sitting aside a mangy Indian pony half a dozen yards away, spat over his horse's head. He said nothing.

"Be careful," George Brandon said as the big gate swung open.

Kern could see the rolling brown plains, rising endlessly before him, sparsely dotted here and there with clumps of trees, a vast expanse of sky without a single cloud.

Back there in the folds and the defiles of those low, rolling hills lurked savage bands of Sioux, painted for war, no women or children with them, according to Dave Bowman.

Guidon fluttering before them, "A" troop moved through the gate before the observing eyes of Kern Malloy and George Brandon. When the wagons had gone through also, Kern bent down to shake Brandon's extended hand. He saw the concern then—the deep concern of a man for his best friend—in Brandon's black eyes.

"Careful," Brandon said again.

Then Kern Malloy was galloping up past the two wagons, staring straight ahead of him, a small frown on his face. Oftentimes, he'd almost hoped that he and Brandon had not been such good friends so that he could hate the man who was now his superior officer, and the man who had taken away from him the only girl in the world he'd ever looked at twice. Hating Brandon would have given him some outlet for his pent-up feelings, but hating George Brandon was impossible.

As they crossed the big hay meadow in front of the fort the "points" were already spreading out on either side. Dave Bowman hung behind waiting for Kern to come up before moving over the horizon himself.

When Kern came up, Bowman said to him tersely,

"You'll be back here before nightfall, Lieutenant. Mark my word."

"We'll go as far as we can," Kern smiled. "Keep your eyes open for Running Bear."

"If I spot that devil," Bowman growled, "I'm crawlin' into a hole myself." He rode off grumpily, kicking at his pony's flanks with his moccasined heels.

Kern watched him disappear over a rise a quarter mile ahead, and again he wondered at the cool courage of these amazing mountain men, now army scouts, who this great western plain, knowing full well could lose themselves in the vastnesses of

that Death might be lurking in the next defile.

Riding up ahead of the column, flanked by two couriers, Kern studied the lay of the land. There was a gradual rise here up to a ridge marked on the army topographical maps as Cheyenne Ridge. The ridge was four hours ride to the west, and after that the land fell away all the way to the twin forks of the Arrow.

Kern watched his "points" far up ahead, moving over the crest of a hill and then down the other side. He glanced back at his two supply wagons and the two dozen troopers riding behind them. He said to one of the couriers,

"Close up the ranks all the way down the line. Bring those wagons along faster."

They were out of sight of the fort now, a single column of blue-jacketed riders, with two white-topped supply wagons, crawling over the gently sloping hills, riding through grass coming up to the horses' hocks.

Although he'd been out on a hundred patrols and reconaissance missions before, once again Kern experienced that singular feeling of awe which was his every time he lost sight of the post and the ancient plains closed in about him.

A hot sun was pushing up from the east, almost overhead, when a "point" rider galloped back toward the column. Kern lifted his hand and waited. Frederick Vernon was riding with him now, and he could hear the younger man begin to breathe faster.

"You think they're out in front of us, Mr. Malloy?" Vernon asked.

"They're always out there," Kern said slowly. It had been like that since the post had first been constructed, even when there was peace with the Sioux. They were out beyond the ridges, in the defiles, watching passing columns of blue-clad men through bitter, hate-filled eyes, watching and waiting while the wily Running Bear secured weapons which put them on even terms with the white soldiers.

As horsemen they were infinitely superior to the white cavalry, the wildest, most skillful riders in the world, literal centaurs, unencumbered with supply trains, living off the land, both man and beast, with a knowledge of the country gained through centuries of living in it.

The "point" came up and saluted briefly. He said, "We spotted signal mirrors up ahead, sir. One to the north and one to the south."

Kern nodded, his face expressionless. The signal mirrors he'd expected, and he'd seen them many times—fiery flashes on a distant ridge where hawk-eyed savages watched and signalled to their comrades.

"Seen anything of Bowman?" he asked the "point".

The trooper shook his head. "He passed us two hours ago, sir. He's out there."

"Drop back," Kern ordered. "Keep a mile ahead of us. The first sight you catch of Indians, no matter how far distant, head back here."

The "point" galloped away, and Kern watched him go, realizing full well the dangerous position of those few men far ahead of the column, the "eyes of the patrol". Oftentimes the first sight they got of the Sioux was a horde of horribly-painted, screeching fiends pouring out of a defile like the hammers of hell, and the first sight for the poor "point" rider was in many cases the last.

"What is he doing out there?" young Vernon asked tensely, referring to Dave Bowman. "How is he keeping out of sight. Where is he?"

"I wish," Kern said fervently, "this command were as safe as he is. When Bowman comes back we'll have all the information we need."

"Then you'll head back for the post?" Vernon asked, disappointed.

Kern smiled thinly.

"I'm ordered to the forks of the Arrow," he said, "unless it's physically impossible to get there."

THEY PAUSED in a clump of timber for the noon day meal. Kern set his sentinels out on the plains at every point of the compass. He gave no orders regarding the cooking fires, knowing full well that five minutes after the column passed through the gates of Fort McLane, the Sioux were aware of it, and had been watching their every moment.

Dave Bowman came in at one o'clock in the afternoon, rifle across the pommel of his saddle, body swaying with every motion of the horse. He was chewing on a piece of grass as he slid from the saddle

and stalked toward one of the fires for a cup of coffee.

He approached Kern with a tin cup in his hand. He said quietly,

"Reckon you kin head back now, Lieutenant."

"What did you see?" Kern asked him.

"The devil," Bowman replied laconically, "an' his 'dog soldiers'." He spat and added. "Runnin' Bear's in a coulee less than five miles north o' here. Three hundred bucks with him. I spotted two other bands, smaller groups, makin' damn near six hundred altogether, an' that ain't all of 'em."

"They well armed?" Kern wanted to know.

"Most of 'em carry rifles," Bowman said. "Lot o' good Henry's, some Spencer breech-loaders."

Kern frowned. "So we know," he said.

"An' we'd better git the hell out o' here," Bowman observed, "before we lose our hair."

"No rush now," Kern half-smiled. "Running Bear can intercept us whenever he wishes to before we get back to Fort McLane."

"You think he will, Mr. Malloy?" Vernon asked quickly.

"I think he will," Kern nodded. He saw Dave Bowman looking at the young lietenant queerly.

They were in the saddle, ready to move, when one of the sentinels came in with the report that there were riders in sight. Kern lifted himself in the saddle and saw them himself, off on a distant ridge, a long line of them, moving slowly, moving toward the oasis.

"Reckon that's one band," Bowman said quietly. "That bunch will figure on drivin' us right into Runnin' Bear's hands. I'd say he was buildin' his trap right now."

"Close ranks," Kern said to Vernon. "We'll keep the wagons in the center of the column now."

"You ain't goin' back over the same route?" Bowman asked quickly.

"We'll cut toward the south," Kern stated, "after we've given Running Bear time to lay his ambush. If they want to fight us they'll have to come out in the open."

The column started east with the red riders still several miles away, moving without haste in their direction. The troop rode in column of fours, tightly punched, "points" still a half mile up ahead and on either side, Frederick Vernon and a dozen troopers forming a vanguard.

The afternoon was very warm now, and Kern could feel the perspiration sliding down his back as he rode along. Sweat trickled down the bronzed faces of the men of Troop A. Kern watched them coming up behind him, and he saw no fear. They were silent, but they were confident. He liked the way they looked at him. He'd been out many times with this company and he'd gained their confidence.

Five miles after leaving the oasis, Kern turned the column slightly toward the south, leaving the well-marked route over which they'd come that morning.

He called a fifteen minute halt at three o'clock in the afternoon, stopping along the bank of a small stream, a distant tributary of the Arrow River.

The straggling band of Indians still followed them, coming up somewhat closer now, but still out of rifle range. He counted about a hundred and fifty in the band. Bright afternoon sunlight glinted on their rifle barrels, and flashed on the mirrors some of them carried around their necks.

The attack came with the usual incredible swiftness, like a sudden thunderstorm on a quiet Sabbath afternoon. They were across the stream and moving up a slight rise when one of the "point" riders lifted his gun and fired into the air.

Kern saw the puff of white smoke and he was giving his orders almost before the report reached them. All the "points" were coming in, riding at a wild gallop, guns banging behind them.

Troop A dismounted smoothly. The horseholders, every fourth man, herded four animals together in close around the wagons. The remaining men knelt on the ground, Springfields loaded and ready, barrels lifted.

Second Lieutenant Vernon yelled, "They're coming from the rear, Mr. Malloy!"

Kern had expected that also. He heard the shrill cries as the band which had been trailing them for miles suddenly galvanized into action and hurtled at them as fast them.

as their sturdy little ponies could take

Twenty-five men crouched on the ground, facing due west, the sun in their faces. They waited for the Sioux to come within range.

The "point" riders spurred in, slipped from the saddles without a word and dropped in line with the kneeling men. Kern watched the oncoming horde calmly. A giant of an Indian rode at the head of the band in front of them. He rode a white horse with its head painted green and with horrible red rings around the eyes. The big Indian was stripped to the waist, his powerful, bronzed torso literally covered with interlocking, yellow circles. His face was barred with stripes of yellow paint also, giving him a hideous appearance. He brandished a new Henry rifle as he rode.

Dave Bowman said tersely, "Runnin' Bear! Lieutenant. I'd like damned well to put a bullet through him."

Kern waited calmly until the onrushing Indians were less than a hundred yards away before he gave the signal to fire. The Sioux guns were crackling all along that curving line of screeching fiends. Several troopers, hit, slumped to the ground, and then the Springfields banged—a deep, concerted roar, drowning out all other sound.

Dozens of horses and riders went down as if a huge scythe had been swung at them. Riderless horses painted with gaudy colors, strips of red flannel and bits of colored glass tied in their manes and tails, raced past the supply wagons and the entrenched troopers.

The wave split down the center and the two wings fled out wide. Running Bear, miraculously unhurt, was riding with the left wing. The army Springfields boomed again with the Sioux still within range, and more riderless ponies scampered away over the plains.

Kern turned his attention to the rear where the second band was slowing down, having witnessed the terrible slaughter of Running Bear's party. They were within range, and Kern gave the signal to fire.

Twenty-five guns banged, the most accurate guns in the Fifth, handled by men who'd been in their Indian fights before, and who were not unnerved by the ghastly appearance and the nerve-wracking bedlam which always accompanied an Indian attack.

Again and again the Springfields banged as the Sioux hastily retreated out of range, leaving at least seventy-five fighters on the ground.

"They got enough," Dave Bowman grinned. He choked a little as the white gunsmoke lifted. "They ain't never seen this kind o' shootin' on the plains, Lieutenant."

"They can have more of it," Kern said, "if they want to stay around." He watched the angry Running Bear now sitting up on a small knoll, brandishing his gun at the besieged white troops.

"He's mad as a hornet," Bowman chuckled. "The Sioux fighters ain't used to bein' treated like that."

Frederick Vernon, his face flushed, came around the wagons. He said quickly,

"Shall we sweep them, Mr. Malloy?"

"We'll stay where we are," Kern said, "for the moment. See to the wounded, Mr. Vernon."

"Three boys were hit," Vernon said. "Corporal Shannon took a bullet through the chest. I believe he's dying, sir." He added, "The other two men received only flesh wounds."

"Shannon," Kern said slowly. "Dick Shannon." He walked quickly down along the line where the three wounded men were lying. A first aid man was bent over Corporal Shannon when Kern came up. He saluted and shook his head.

Shannon, a grizzled old army man, lay on his back, looking up at the sky. They'd cut away his coat and his shirt, and Kern saw the hole where the Indian bullet had gone through. He said,

"Shannon, you're not leaving us like this with a big fight on our hands."

The veteran trooper tried to grin. His face was gray. He blinked several times, and he said slowly,

"Lieutenant, we give 'em hell."

"That's right," Kern nodded, "and now we'll give them more. I want to take you back to the post alive, Shannon. I want to show the boys what a real Indian fighter looks like."

"Reckon they kin take a look at you, sir," Corporal Shannon said. "They'll be lookin' at a fightin' army man who don't talk too much about it."

Kern bit his lips. He said to the enlisted man looking after Shannon, "Get him into the supply wagon. We're heading for the fort now."

Shannon was dead before the two wagons started to roll again. Running Bear's braves watched from a distance, still yelling defiantly, occasionally one of them charging within range to shoot off his gun. There was no concerted effort to stop the advance.

Kern kept them close together, the supply wagons now in the center of the line of march, and every man ready at an instant's notice to dismount and form a firing line.

"Runnin' Bear's wishin' he'd brought up all his bucks now," Dave Bowman said. "There's only about four hundred here. I believe the rest of 'em headed south to raid Kiowa ponies while they're waitin' for the soldiers to come out an' chase 'em."

"One thing we know definitely," Kern said. "The Sioux have kicked over all the peace treaties and they want war. This was no raid on a small patrol. If Running Bear could have done it, he'd have wiped out our entire force."

"An' now," Bowman said slowly, "Major Brandon's got every right in the world to take the boys out an' find Runnin' Bear an' punish him."

KERN MALLOY stared straight ahead of him, realizing now why George Brandon had sent him out. The Major knew full well that Running Bear, itching for fight, any kind of fight, would attack a fairly good-sized force of men outside the post walls. He'd been attacked, and now George Brandon's future actions were beyond censure.

They moved slowly away from the scene of the fight, with the Sioux trailing them on both sides and from the rear, but making no attempt to stop them again. They traveled that way until the sun was nearly down and the post walls came into sight. Running Bear withdrew then, after firing a volley of shots at the retreating troopers.

Two troops of cavalry poured out of the gates to give Running Bear chase in the gathering darkness. Major Brandon had heard sounds of shooting as they drew nearer, and he'd had his rescue party ready when they hove into sight.

The Sioux melted away in the shadows, still whooping defiantly as Kern Malloy led his weary detail into Fort McLane. There were anxious-faced women standing there, watching the men of Troop A as they came in. Quite a few of the veterans were married men their wives and children lived in "Sudsville", which were the quarters of the married enlisted men.

Kern remembered thankfully that Corporal Shannon had been a bachelor. He wondered whether he would be so fortunate when they came back the next time after George Brandon's excursion.

Dismounting, Kern let an orderly take his gray to the stables. Slipping off his gauntlets, he went direct to headquarters, seeing the lights in the windows.

George Brandon was waiting anxiously for him. He'd been pacing up and down the floor, a cigar in his mouth. When Kern entered, the dark-haired man's face lighted up. Impulsively, he grasped Kern's hand. He said quietly,

"So you had a run in with them?"

"Not all of them," Kern smiled thinly. "Bowman believes the larger party went south to raid the Kiowas. They'll be back after this slap we took at them."

"Running Bear?" Brandon asked.

"You could have seen him fifteen minutes ago," Kern said. "He was with us all the way in." He saw the gleam of triumph come into George Brandon's eyes.

"So," Major Brandon said softly, "Running Bear is looking for a fight."

Kern Malloy looked down at the gauntlets in his right hand. He wanted to say that that was self-evident, a fact which had been well-known to Colonel Lawrence. Every Indian was a fighting man at heart; he loved to fight and to kill because he was a savage and he'd been born with that in him. It was not so with a white man; it should not have been so.

"We'll take the field tomorrow," George Brandon was saying. "Do you think your Troop A will be sufficiently rested, Kern?"

"I believe so," Kern nodded.

"Good," Brandon said grimly. "They're excellent fighting men—excellent. I'll take Troops A, M and L. A dozen supply wagons should suffice. We'll need rations for one week. Three hundred rounds of ammunition per man."

"What about the Gatlings?" Kern asked.

"The Gatlings?" Brandon repeated. "No, they'll slow us down, Kern. We'll need speed to catch up with Running Bear and punish him for this attack today."

Kern hesitated. "You remember the Gatling I am having mounted on a supply wagon, Major? I believe it is about finished."

George Brandon smiled patronizingly. He'd heard Kern talking about the mobile weapon, but he'd taken little interest in it. He'd never even been over to the machine shop.

"You want to bring it along, Kern, for a test?" he asked.

"There is a possibility," Kern admitted, "that we might have great need of such a weapon."

Brandon's smile broadened. "With three troops of United States cavalry at my back, Kern, do you think I need heavy arms to fight these savages?"

Kern Malloy moistened his lips. "On the field of battle, sir," he observed, "no one knows exactly what equipment will be needed. I'd like permission to take it along. I guarantee that it will keep up with the supply wagons."

George Brandon shrugged. "You have my permission, Kern," he said, "but I don't think you'll have an opportunity to use the gun. The Sioux will scatter when we strike them, and it'll be a running fight from there on."

Kern didn't say anything to that. On the way back from the fight with Running Bear's party, Dave Bowman had stated that the big Indian had undoubtedly sent fast messengers south to bring up his scattered bands. When George Brandon left the post on the morrow, Running Bear would be at full strength—his force possibly four times that of Brandon's, and he would be fighting on the open field where an Indian was at his best.

"Any questions?" Brandon asked.

"No, sir," Kern said.

"Get some rest," George Brandon advised. "You'll need all your strength tomorrow."

Kern went out. He walked woodenly along the boardwalk in front of Officers' Row. Dave Bowman was lounging in his doorway, waiting for him. The scout said tersely,

"What happens, Lieutenant?"

"We move out tomorrow morning," Kern told him. He went inside and lighted his lamp. He heard Bowman in the doorway, cursing softly, cursing savagely.

III

CHANGING into fatigues, Kern had a late, solitary supper at the Officers' Mess, and then walked across the cavalry yard to the mechanics' shed. Despite the lateness of the hour four carpenters still labored in the shed under lights from lanterns suspended above. The chief carpenter, Mason, nodded when Kern came up. He said,

"We'll have her set in another hour, sir. Shall I keep the men on or finish it up in the morning?"

"We're taking it out in the morning," Kern told him. "I'd appreciate it if you kept working." The Gatling was already up on the wagon bed on a revolving base. A large table-top base had been constructed, which was bolted to the wagon bed with a single heavy bolt. There were heavy iron casters between the table-top base and the wagon bed on which the base could revolve, turning the Gatling gun in any direction, the gun being bolted to the table-top.

"There's a lot of recoil on these guns," Mason observed, "but I think our wagon's built to take it. You'd better pick heavy stock to pull it though, Lieutenant. There's a lot of weight here."

He nodded.

"I'm going over to the stables now," Kern said. "You did a good job, Mason." He climbed up on the wagon and pushed the revolving carriage around several times. It was heavy.

The workmen were putting on the hinged sides which could be thrown down when the gun was put into action, and which entirely concealed the Gatling gun when it wasn't being used, a tarpaulin being drawn over the top of it.

With Sergeant Crowley, Kern walked over to the stables and went down the line of stalls where the work mules were kept. He selected a half dozen of the biggest, strongest animals, and gave Crowley orders to harness them to the rig in the morning.

"Reckon they'll pull it, sir," the old Sergeant grinned. "Them animals are the toughest in the regiment."

"What do you think of the gun, Sergeant?" Kern asked him quietly. Crowley had already been assigned to this particu-

lar Gatling, and he'd operated it on the firing range.

Sergeant Crowley scratched his chin for a moment. "Pardon the language, Lieutenant," he said, "but a gun ain't no damned good to anyone when it's out o' the fight. Your gun will be in the fight, sir, an' that's what counts."

Kern nodded. "Thanks for your opinion, Sergeant. I respect it."

Walking back along Officer's Row, Kern could see the lights far across the parade grounds—yellow squares of light, the windows of the company barracks. The bugler was playing "taps".

Kern stared at those lights grimly, thinking of the morrow, wondering how many of those men in blue would be dead when "taps" again sounded twenty-fours from now, and dead because an officer loved war too well.

A man and a girl were coming down toward him along the boardwalk, strolling in the moonlight, hand in hand. The girl was in white, her body silhouetted against the light of the moon.

Kern stepped to one side to let them pass. The girl was Marjorie Dilroy, and the man was George Brandon. Kern touched his hat to the girl.

Brandon said jocularly, "Been checking up on your gun, Lieutenant?"

"That's right, sir," Kern told him. "We can roll it out tomorrow."

Major Brandon laughed. "The Lieutenant," he said to Miss Dilroy, "Is a studious man, but he does not like war."

"I know that," Marjorie Dilroy said, and there was respect in her voice.

"If we do find some use for your gun during this campaign," George Brandon grinned, "I'll certainly mention it in my report, Kern. You might be called to Washington for a demonstration."

"Thank you, sir," Kern said. He stood with his hat off now, his face in the shadows. When Brandon and the girl walked on, he replaced the hat and continued along the boardwalk. Looking across the parade ground he noticed that the lights in the barracks were going out one by one, and he thought that that was the way life was—the lights going out one by one, and then the darkness.

The three companies were lined up in the cavalry yard as the bugler played the "General", signal for packing, loading wagons. Standard bearers, guidons rippling in the morning breeze, moved up to the head of each company.

Kern Malloy looked to the mounted Gatling gun. Sergeant Crowley had his six powerful mules harnessed and in the traces. Two cavalrymen rode the wheelers, turning the heavy carriage into line at the head of the dozen supply wagons. The big wagon did not look much different from the others. A white canvas top covered the gun; the sides had been built out somewhat farther than the regulation army supply wagon. The six mules seemed to have no difficulty pulling it.

Troopers, standing beside their mounts, waiting for the "Boots and Saddles" bugle call, glanced at the wagon curiously. Troop A had been assigned to protect the valuable supply wagons without which the campaign was doomed to failure. The toughened men of the gray-horse troop were last in line.

Troop M was at the head of the column, with Troop L directly behind it. A trooper stood outside headquarters, holding George Brandon's big black charger.

Young Frederick Vernon stood beside Kern, face flushed, the excitement putting red spots in his cheeks. There were four other officers with this force—Mr. Craig, Mr. Sellers, and Mr. McCall—all of them young, inexperienced, with absolutely no previous contact with the Sioux.

Fervently, Kern Malloy wished that the veteran Indian fighter, Captain Jason Dilroy, was along with the outfit to advise George Brandon, and to help the younger officers in this their baptism of fire. But Dilroy was far away, and George Brandon had no intention of waiting for him.

"This outfit, Mr. Malloy," young Vernon was saying proudly, "could ride right to the Pacific coast."

Kern didn't say anything. Pride was a good thing in a soldier; pride was a necessary thing. No outfit was worth the powder it took to blow it to hell if it did not have *"esprit de corps."* But pride was also a dangerous thing—dangerous when it took the place of reason.

There were three Arickari scouts accompanying this column — sullen, lean, brown men with loose black hair blowing beneath bandeaus of bright cloth. They sat

astride their shaggy, wiry Indian ponies, watching the wagons being loaded, listening to the music of the regimental band now playing in one corner of the yard.

IT WAS a golden day with a bright blue sky and small wisps of white cloud floating on the horizon. Kern could see the rolling hills behind the ten foot log barricade of the post. Nothing moved on these tawny hills.

Dave Bowman, the scout, was already out of the post, riding up and down over the swells, riding with Death all around him. Bowman was to see how far Running Bear had run last night.

The band was playing the popular favorite, "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Kern saw Marjorie Dilroy standing with a number of other women near the gate. On the other side were twenty or thirty women, wives of enlisted men, children clinging to their skirts. They were watching the three hundred odd cavalrymen tensely, the fears that were as old as life itself showing plainly in their eyes.

A door banged in the interlude between musical pieces, and Kern saw George Brandon coming down the steps from headquarters, pulling on his gauntlets. Brandon went into the saddle lightly, easily, a man in the full prime of his life.

He rode directly up to Kern and he said quietly, "I am assigning you to the supply wagons, Mr. Malloy. Take Company A."

Kern nodded and saluted. "Very good, sir," he said. It was the position he wanted because it kept him near the Gatling gun, and he'd had the queer feeling all morning that before the sun went down this afternoon he would have had the gun in action.

The bugler was playing "Boots and Saddles" now, and Kern listened to the familiar slapping sound as the troopers hit the saddles and sat there, erect and ready. The crossed sabers, surmounted by a "5" were on the front of their forage caps, insignia of the Fifth.

The heavy smell of coffee from the nearby "teamsters' mess" still lingered in the morning air. A half broken mule down along the line of wagons was kicking in the traces until one of the teamsters quieted him.

The big gates swung open and the band started to play George Brandon's favorite, "Garry Owen", a lilting tune which brought grins to the faces of the enlisted men as they moved by the watching commander.

Kern sat a little behind Brandon, young Vernon at his side, Mr. Douglas McCall close at hand, a red-haired, likeable young man who had come from the Point six months before Frederick Vernon.

The heavy wagons were moving now, and Kern watched his Gatling gun go through the gates, Sergeant Crowley riding beside it proudly. The veteran noncomm looked at Kern and lifted his hand in salute.

Kern saw Marjorie Dilroy looking straight at him as he fell in line with Company A, riding behind the supply wagons. He lifted his right hand to his hat. He noticed that she was a trifle pale. She had a handkerchief in her hands and she was twisting it nervously. She managed to smile.

Some of the women, wives of enlisted men, were crying openly now. Kern saw Sergeant Timothy Hackett, of Troop A, a big, square-jawed man, swallowing several times, but looking straight ahead. Hackett's wife was there, and his two small children.

Then they were out of the post, column of twos moving up the slope, two troops in front of the wagons, one troop behind it, "points" moving up to the front, fanning out to the sides.

The Arickaris loped away without a word to anyone, disappearing over the first rise in the land.

Kern trotted up to Sergeant Hackett. He said tersely, "Close up those wagons, Sergeant. I don't want more than ten feet between them at any time."

Hackett saluted and moved up along the line. The ground was hard, firm, sunbaked, and the powerful mules in the traces had no difficulty moving the wagons. Kern remembered spring campaigns when they'd been bogged down in the mud, slithering along, men, horses, wagons and equipment splattered with the gummy substance. Mud today would have rendered his Gatling gun *hors de combat.*

Behind him he could still hear the band, and glancing back he could see George Brandon leaning out of the saddle, talking with Marjorie Dilroy, and then Brandon

straightened up. He galloped his horse through the gates and came up along the line of march, riding the black charger as if he were an integral part of the big animal.

Brandon swept past him, taking his position up at the head of his regiment. Frederick Vernon rode with him, and Douglas McCall, two young war-birds.

It was no task following Running Bear's trail after he'd left off chasing Kern's battalion the previous day. The big Indian had made no attempt to conceal his course, and Kern attributed this to the fact he did not consider any of the post commanders foolish enough to leave their stockade and face him in the open field.

It grew warm as the sun arched up into the sky. Sweat streaked down the faces of the troopers as they moved along; there were dark perspiration stains under their armpits. It was the heat of mid-summer on the open plains where there were no trees with the exception of isolated oases.

Twice off to the south Kern caught glimpses of flashing mirrors, and once there was a smoke signal from a crest many miles to the west. The men were quiet as they rode, the loneliness beginning to press down upon them.

At eleven o'clock in the morning Dave Bowman hove into sight, riding in that same leisurely fashion, chewing on a wisp of grass.

He'd been out since before dawn.

KERN SAW him ride up to the waiting Major Brandon and speak with him for a few moments. Then the scout wheeled his horse and came down along the column, heading for the wagons. He turned his horse in at Kern's side and rode with him, knee to knee.

"Well?" Kern asked.

"If it was me," Bowman growled, "I'd turn this damned column around an' head fer the post quick as I could make it, but I'm not the Major."

"What did you see?" Kern wanted to know.

"Injuns," Bowman said tersely. "The whole damned plains is full of 'em—Brule' Sioux, Miniconjou Sioux, Ogallah Sioux—all of 'em fighters, all of 'em anxious to shoot hell out o' the cavalry fer the beatin' you gave 'em yesterday."

"Running Bear got his bunch all together?" Kern asked.

"Two warparties joined him a little after dawn this mornin'," Bowman stated, "an' there's more comin' in. He'll have fourteen hundred when he hits this column."

"You tell the Major that?" Kern wanted to know.

"He smiles," Bowman scowled. "He don't think there's that many fightin' Injuns in the whole west. Damn it, he don't know that if the Sioux an' the Cheyennes join together they kin put five thousand men in a fight any time they want to."

"See anything of our Arickari scouts?" Kern half-smiled.

"They skipped," Bowman said grimly. "They got a look at the crowd Runnin' Bear has with him an' they headed north as fast they could ride."

Kern grimaced. He touched his spurs to his horse and rode up ahead till he was alongside George Brandon. He said quietly,

"Bowman informs me, sir, that our scouts have deserted us. We have no one up ahead of our points."

Brandon frowned. "They're yellow dogs," he snapped, referring to the Arickaris. "They've always been afraid of the Sioux. Spread your 'points' out farther, Lieutenant. Send Bowman out again as soon as he can go."

Kern hesitated. He said finally, "I'm inclined to believe Bowman's report, Major, that Running Bear has well over a thousand bucks with him."

George Brandon looked at him steadily. "Do you want me to turn back, Kern?" he asked quietly.

Kern bit his lips. "Your command, sir," he said.

The tightness went out of Brandon's fine face and he smiled. "We've known each other too long for disagreements, Kern," he said. "Let's have no hard feelings."

Again it was the nice gesture—typical of George Brandon. As Kern's superior officer he could have reprimanded him sharply. As a friend he had a soft answer.

Kern passed the word along to the "points", and then rode back to his position behind the supply wagons. He said to Dave Bowman who was chewing on a slice of raw bacon,

"You'd better get out in front of us as soon as you can. I wouldn't like to see our points wiped out."

Bowman nodded. "Ain't eaten since last night," he confessed. "No chance to make a fire this mornin'. They're thicker than fleas out there."

Kern watched the scout ride away again ten minutes later, and at high noon, Major Brandon called a halt. The standard bearers rode to positions with the guidons, the three companies following their own guidons. Picket ropes were set up and enlisted men scrambled for firewood.

They were in a small wooded grove, hardly large enough to accommodate the three troops. As usual sentries were set out a full half mile on the plains.

It was a quiet camp with none of the usual joking or horse-play among the men. Watching them, Kern realized that every man knew they were in definitely hostile country, possibly already surrounded by a savage, implacable foe.

There were no more mirror flashings, and no smoke signals. There were no sounds, except the low talk of the cavalrymen, the steady chop-chop of an axe.

Squatting on his heels with Frederick Vernon, Kern had a cup of coffee. He saw George Brandon coming their way and he stood up, the tin cup still in his hand. Brandon was smiling. He said to Kern,

"We'll be staying here two hours, Mr. Malloy. There's no use running our horses down in this hot weather. We'll move on when some of the heat has gone out of the sun."

Kern nodded, almost smiling at the incongruity of this statement. They were supposed to be trailing a large band of Sioux for the purpose of punishing them for their attack on white troops the day before, but George Brandon, in the midst of this chase was ordering a two hour halt. It was sufficient proof that Brandon no longer considered this a chase, knowing that the Sioux were very close at hand this very moment and no longer running. Brandon had known from the beginning that Running Bear had retreated only far enough so that he could get his riders in between the three troops and the fort.

George Brandon went on cheerily, "Mr. Vernon, you've been asking for action. Take two dozen men out for reconaissance. If there are Indians here I want a look at them."

"Yes, sir," Frederick Vernon grinned. He was instantly alert, anxious to be gone.

"Don't go too far," Brandon ordered, "and don't look for a fight. When you spot Indians get back here."

Kern watched the young man counting off his troopers. The two dozen hit the saddles and moved out of the grove, heading due west. They passed the lonely sentinels stationed on small rises a half mile from the oasis.

George Brandon said to Kern, "He's a good boy. The experience will do him good."

Kern Malloy didn't say anything, but his lips were tight across his teeth. It would be good experience for Frederick Vernon, he knew, if the second lieutenant was able to retain his scalp!

The small patrol was now out of sight, swallowed up among the hills. Kern strolled over to his gun wagon for a final checkup. Sergeant Crowley was sitting up on the seat, smoking a pipe. He said thoughtfully,

"Kind o' glad, Lieutenant, that we got this thing along now."

Kern nodded. He noticed that the mules were still in the traces as he'd ordered even though some of the wagoners had unhitched their teams to lead them down to the brook to drink.

A full hour passed, and then Dave Bowman rode in. Kern was talking with George Brandon when the scout came up. The little man said laconically,

"They're headin' this way, Major, the whole damned bunch of 'em, comin' from three directions."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when they heard the distant shots —the heavy boom of army carbines, and the lighter, sharp crack of rifles.

"That'll be young Vernon," Brandon said tersely. "It's begun, Kern."

The shots had come from a point due west. Dave Bowman was staring that way incredulously. He said slowly,

"Hell! That boy Vernon out there?"

George Brandon reddened a little. He didn't answer Bowman's question. Striding away he began to snap his orders. Troops M and L were to accompany him. Troop A, under Kern Malloy was to remain in

the grove, set up barricades, if necessary, with the wagons.

IV

THEY COULD see blue-clad riders coming over a rise a long distance away, and then they heard the whoops of pursuing Indians. The crest of a hill was suddenly black with them.

Kern counted the white riders spurring toward them frantically. He counted fourteen men, and there had been twenty-five, including Frederick Vernon, when they rode out of the grove.

Even as he watched, Kern saw another trooper shot from the saddle. Dave Bowman, at his side, cursed bitterly. Kern said to George Brandon as he went past him once,

"My orders irrevocable, sir? You might need help out there."

"Use your own discretion," Brandon flung back. He was in the saddle now, anxious to be gone. The two troops were forming in line.

Frederick Vernon's battered patrol stumbled into camp then, thirteen of them, tight-faced, dead-eyed men, who had had a race with death. Vernon, himself, was with the patrol, swaying in the saddle, head hanging loosely on his shoulders.

Sergeant Hackett of Troop A caught him as he started to fall. There was no color in the younger man's face, and then Kern saw his blue jacket stained in the front just above the belt, a wide stain.

Hackett lowered Vernon to the ground and straightened up. He said to Kern quietly,

"He's dead, sir."

George Brandon was sitting astride his horse less than a half dozen yards away. Above the whoops of the Sioux out on the plains he had heard the words. His dark eyes turned in Kern's direction.

Kern was looking at him steadily, almost accusingly, and before the Lieutenant's gaze, George Brandon's eyes fell. There was something in Brandon's face which Kern had never seen before—something akin to remorse, the acknowledgement of error.

Major Brandon rode out of the grove with two hundred and fifteen men, heading straight for the scattered Indian body out on the plains. Kern set his men to erecting rude barricades of branches, cases, barrels, blankets, anything he could drag from the supply wagons.

The wagons had been drawn up in a line along the fringe of the grove, and the barricades were constructed between the wagons and in under the wheels.

Sharp-eyed, grim-faced troopers of Company A crept under the wagons, pushed their Springfields through crevices in the barricade, set their cartridge pouches on the ground nearby and waited.

There was no confusion here. Kern gave his orders quietly, efficiently. He was watching George Brandon's squadron, still heading out across the plains, column of fours now, a thick, solid body, a flying wedge to drive into that loosely formed band of red riders.

Dave Bowman, at Kern's side, said tersely, "I don't like that, Lieutenant. The Major's thinkin' that's all there is of 'em." He pointed to the south. "Look over there."

Kern followed the man's gnarled finger, and he saw another scattered mass of Indians hurling themselves in Brandon's direction.

"They ain't runnin' away," Bowman said bitterly. "It's us who'll have to do the runnin' before the day's over." He glanced back at Frederick Vernon's dead body. "Them," he added, "who are able to run."

George Brandon was within two hundred yards of the body of Sioux which had chased Vernon's patrol back. Guns were popping now, and the Indians were drifting back.

"They're drawin' him out," Bowman muttered. "They're gonna git behind him, Lieutenant." Bowman was looking toward the north now. He said slowly, "An' now the Devil, hisself, is gittin' into this fight."

He was pointing again, and with sinking heart Kern looked in that direction. A third squadron of Indians was coming into the fight, cutting in behind Brandon's column, riding very hard, a big white horse leading them.

The distance was too great for details, but Kern Malloy knew that that white horse's head was painted green, and that there were horrible red rings around his eyes. The Indian riding the white charger

had his body painted with interlocking yellow circles. It was Running Bear.

"They're stoppin'," Bowman said. "The Major's puttin' the boys on the ground. He sees them other Injuns!"

Kern could see that Brandon's squadron had slowed up and were now forming a circle, horse-holders to the center. Men in blue were dropping to their knees to fight off the charging horde.

Running Bear's squadron was already in behind Brandon's two troops, cutting them off from the grove, circling them with a ring of death.

"There's too many of 'em," Bowman was saying, a peculiar tone to his voice. "Once they break in there it'll be over in ten minutes—every one of 'em gone!"

Kern Malloy stared over the barricade. White puffs of smoke were rising from the besieged white troopers, nearly blotting them out. Indian riders were whirling around in a wild melee, tearing in to shoot, bending down over the sides of their horses to keep their bodies out of sight.

Now and again Kern spotted Running Bear's big white horse in the thick of the fight. Several hundred of the Sioux tore in on a direct charge which reached nearly to the circle of fighting troopers.

"Must be fifteen hundred of 'em out there," Bowman said. "If they clean up the Major they're comin' here, an' after that they'll head fer the fort."

"Yes, sir!"

Kern snapped, "Sergeant Hackett."

When Hackett trotted up, Kern said to him, "You are in charge of this troop, Sergeant. Get a man back to the fort as quickly as possible. Tell them to line those Gatling guns along the wall. Have them dispatch a courier east to Fort Hale."

"Yes, sir," Hackett said.

"Under no circumstances are you to leave this grove," Kern went on. "They'll cut you off before you can get a mile."

He was running toward the gun wagon then, running with Dave Bowman at his heels.

"It's goin' bad now," Bowman was yelling. "Ain't so much firin' from our boys any more."

Taut, grim-faced, Kern found Sergeant Crowley standing near the gun wagon. He said quietly,

"We're taking her out, Sergeant." He saw the slow smile creep across the veteran's face.

"Reckon we'll kind o' need her now, Lieutenant," he said.

Two troopers leaped into the saddles on the wheel animals. They were cracking their whips when Kern and Dave Bowman climbed up into the wagon along with Sergeant Crowley.

Crowley stripped the tarpaulin from the heavy gun. He rubbed his rough hand over the metal barrels, and he checked his cartridge container.

Standing up in front, Kern watched the fight. Heavy clouds of white smoke drifted across the level plain on which Brandon's two troops had been trapped. Shrieking, naked, painted red riders tore in and out between the rifts in the gunsmoke.

Listening carefully, Kern noted that the fire from the carbines was not nearly as heavy as it had been in the beginning.

"Nobody sees us yet," Bowman said. "Reckon they're in fer a hell of a surprise."

Kern nodded. The Gatlings sent out to Fort McLane were the first ones shipped to the western frontier for testing, and they'd never been in operation. There were still doubts as to how it would act on a moving wagon. The recoil from the Gatling was terrific, and there was the possibility that it might tear itself loose, slip off the wagon, and become useless.

They moved away from the grove, a single white-topped supply wagon drawn by six mules, rattling across the plain, up over a crest, and down toward the "plain of Death".

KERN GRIPPED the wagon seat and stood there, looking through the opening of the canvas top. They were within a quarter of a mile of Brandon's men when a party of Indians suddenly swerved out of the circling crew, ringing the white troopers, and hurtled toward the oncoming wagon. Kern could hear their whoops of delight. He said to Crowley,

"Get this canvas back. Lower your sides."

It was done in a few moments. The canvas top was rolled back, the wind catching it and tearing it loose from the rapidly moving wagon, sending it flying along the ground.

The four sides of the wagon, hinged to the bed, went down with a bang, and the gun was revealed, Sergeant Crowley standing behind it, gripping the crank handle, his forage cap over his eyes. He said tersely,

"They're damn near within range, Lieutenant."

Kern noticed that the oncoming group of Sioux had slowed down at this peculiar transformation of the supply wagon, but they were coming on again now, about fifty in number, spreading out, opening fire with their rifles.

The two troopers, riding the wheel mules, crouched down over the necks of the animals. Kern said,

"All right, Sergeant." He stood with Dave Bowman, a little to the rear of the gun, gripping an iron hand rail which had been erected for this purpose.

There was a sudden, roaring clatter, the sound of many guns banging at once, one report following the other so closely that it was almost impossible to distinguish the individual reports.

"Jeerusalem!" Dave Bowman gasped in awe.

Sergeant Crowley had stopped cranking the handle. A semi-circle of riding Indians had been coming toward them, about five deep. A hole had been blasted down the center of the semi-circle. At least a dozen Indians and horses were down, torn to pieces by the stream of bullets.

"Get that lever!" Kern yelled at Bowman.

There were two lever bars to push around the heavy, revolving base on which the gun was set. Lurching across the rapidly moving wagon, Kern grasped one bar and Bowman the other. They turned the gun base slowly as Sergeant Crowley started to crank the handle again.

After the first terrible clatter of the Gatling, the Indians had relapsed into awed silence. They'd pulled up, stunned, and were watching the "juggernaut from hell" still rolling toward them, spitting death.

When the gun began to roar again they tried to break away, screaming in terror, but the bullets followed them, a spray of lead as Kern and Bowman pushed the gun base around. The entire left side of the semi-circle was mowed down by this second burst, and the remaining Indians tore away, still shrieking, some of them even throwing away their rifles as they rode.

"Good work, Sergeant," Kern said.

Sergeant Crowley spat over the side of the moving wagon. He still stood behind his gun, gripping the handle to steady himself. They were moving straight toward the circle of Indian riders wheeling around George Brandon's doomed troopers. Some of them had heard the clatter of the Gatling, and they'd spun out of line and were staring toward the approaching wagon.

"Try it again," Kern said grimly. He didn't like this kind of slaughter, but there was no alternative under the circumstances. Running Bear wanted to fight, to kill, and he would continue killing until every white trooper was dead on the field of battle.

The third burst from the Gatling ripped through a group of painted savages, literally knocking them from their ponies, opening a hole through which the gun wagon could go.

The Sioux in the vicinity scattered wildly right and left, too terrified even to shoot back at them. With Kern and Bowman revolving the base, Sergeant Crowley kept up his deadly fire, filling the plain with riderless horses.

They could hear the cheers now from the besieged troopers, and Kern caught a glimpse of them through the lifting smoke screen. Hundreds of the Sioux on the far side of the plain had heard the rattle of the heavy gun, but had not seen the wagon coming up. They were speeding around the circle now, coming toward them, and this time Kern spotted the big white horse of Running Bear in the lead.

The big Indian wore a full war-battle head-dress, his only article of clothing. Kern could see his hideously-painted face, his hawk's eyes, the sharp prow of his nose, the cruel lines of his thin-lipped mouth.

And then the thing happened which Kern had feared the most, the weakest phase of his "wagon gun." One of the swing mules was hit and went down in the traces, dragging its mate with it.

The two wheelers piled up on top of the swing mules, and the heavy wagon smashed into them, coming to a sudden

stop over the badly-smashed, screaming mules.

Kern was knocked up against the Gatling and almost thrown from the wagon. Sergeant Crowley was smashed up against the crank handle, and his head striking it, cut badly across the eyes. Unconscious, he slumped to the floor of the wagon.

Picking himself up, dazedly, Kern saw Dave Bowman sitting up dumbly on the grass a dozen yards away. Bowman had been hurled clear of the gun wagon, but was miraculously unhurt.

Running Bear and his braves were still bearing down on them, shouting triumphantly. They were less than fifty yards away when Kern got his hand on the crank of the Gatling.

The heavy gun was still on the gun base and in working order.

He started to turn the crank slowly, speeding it up, feeling the terrible recoil which nearly tore his arm from its socket. He had the gun barrels trained on Running Bear, and the big Indian took the full force of the first burst. Lead smashed into his broad chest, toppling him from his white horse. The bullets ripped into the interlocking yellow circles on his chest —circles which acted as so many bulls-eyes for the revolving guns Kern Malloy was handling.

Dozens of bullets, hundreds of bullets, sprayed from the mouths of the guns at the rate of twelve hundred per minute. Frantically, Kern slowed down occasionally to tug at the revolving base, spinning the gun so that he could enlarge his field.

They were going down before him like so many ten-pins, horses, riders, whatever got in the way of the driving bullets. And then the troopers from Brandon's command were leaving their position, charging straight for the Sioux, shooting as they came.

Again the cloud of white smoke covered the field, hiding the dead and the dying, mercifully concealing wounded horses in agony stumbling and staggering about the field.

SICK at heart, Kern held his fire as the Indians broke and fled. He saw blue-coated men, cheering wildly coming through the gunsmoke. Cavalry horses, without riders, were fleeing past as Brandon's defense became an offense and the horseholders joined in the route.

Leaping from the now useless gun-wagon, Kern caught a big chestnut animal and leaped into the saddle. Troopers on foot and troopers mounted were moving past him, firing, their faces twisted with joy for their miraculous deliverance, and hatred for the red foe who had so nearly annihilated them.

There were not too many troopers around him, Kern noticed bitterly, not two hundred, not even a hundred and fifty. He looked for George Brandon but didn't see him. He spotted Douglas McCall, charging forward with a body of men behind him, waving a bloody saber, and then he saw Edward Sellers, Second Lieutenant Sellers, head bandaged, hatless. He was clutching an Indian war bonnet he'd picked up somewhere, probably not even knowing why he did it. The young officer was riding with the war bonnet in one hand and a saber in the other.

Kern went with them through the white, drifting smoke. There were Indians up ahead, brown forms, riding painted ponies, riding like mad. And then he noticed that another man was riding beside him, a man on a great black horse, a man with black hair and black eyes, and a face like the face of a ghost. It was George Brandon, hatless too, drops of red blood on his ashen face. A bullet had grazed his right cheekbone, cutting the skin, making it bleed.

He looked at Kern and he slowed down. He was breathing heavily, his eyes wild, filled with fear and remorse. They were alone on a small crest here for one brief moment.

George Brandon gasped. "Kern! Kern, I lost half my command! Do you hear that? I lost half my command." His voice was almost a sob now. "Do you hear that, Kern?" he repeated.

"All right," Kern said quietly. "Get control of yourself, George."

"I can't stand it," George Brandon said hoarsely. "I can't go back, Kern. I killed those boys—every one of them. I murdered Frederick Vernon!"

"No," Kern snapped. "This is war, George. The boys understood that when they enlisted. Young Vernon knew what

he was in for when he selected an army career."

"I can't go back," George Brandon half-screamed again. "I can't go back, Kern."

He started to whip at his horse savagely, kicking with his spurs. The big black screamed and leaped away. Kern yelled,

"George!"

But Brandon was already streaking over the plains, following the Sioux, riding low in the saddle, whipping up the horse.

And then an Indian bullet struck his horse full in the chest as he spun the animal around and started after Brandon. The chestnut went down on its knees, and Kern kicked his boots clear. He landed on hands and knees in soft earth and he squatted there, watching a black horse driving through a rift in the clouds of white gunsmoke. And then the rift closed.

In his report that night back at Fort McLane, Kern Malloy wrote the following: "He was last seen riding after the Sioux."

He looked at those words on the foolscap after he'd finished writing them. He looked at them for a long time in silence.

The window was open and he could hear a woman wailing over in 'Sudsville', a woman crying for her man who would never return. And there was another woman along Officers' Row who was mourning for the man she was supposed to marry. Kent went over to see her.

She was not crying. She sat near the window of her parlor, looking out across the parade grounds.

Marjorie Dilroy turned to Kern. She said, "What about George?"

"He's with his men," Kern told her, "where every good officer wants to be."

"I'm glad you're safe," Marjorie Dilroy said slowly, after a long silence.

Kern bowed his head and looked at the floor. The girl hadn't meant it because she wasn't thinking of those things, but there was promise in the words. For the present Kern was willing to let it ride like that.

BILL HEUMAN

Author of

Gunsmoke On The Arrow

Got the writing bug when I came out of a Long Island High Schoool and immediately started doing material for the *Saturday Evening Post*. It came back pronto, and after wising up to myself, wrote my million words of apprenticeship before selling anything, and then sold a three dollar and fifty cent short to a Sunday School magazine.

Born in Brooklyn, educated in the big city, spent a dozen years or so in a New York City business office and never wrote a story about New York. The faraway hills always look greenest to a writer.

Settled down a few years ago in the beautiful town of Huntington on L. I., raising chickens, ducks, pigeons, dogs, one baby so far, and love the life; that is when the stories are clicking. When they don't I often wish I'd studied to be a plumber's apprentice or an honest bricklayer.

VIRGINIA CITY

By T. N. DUROSKO

The essence of the Old West—the win-all, lose-all violence, the rotgut turbulence, and the pioneer spirit of fearless men—is still alive in this famous old city.

MARK TWAIN, rough and woolly newspaperman at Virginia City, once wrote to a friend. "This place is fabulously rich in gold, silver, copper, lead, coal, quicksilver . . . desperadoes, gamblers sharpers, coyotes, poets, preachers and jackass rabbits. I overheard a gentleman say the other day that this is the d----dest place under the sun . . . and that comprehensive description I fully subscribe to."

And a good part of Mark Twain's description still holds true—some eighty-six years later!

Many deposits of copper, lead, coal, quicksilver remain untouched. No Comstocker bothered with "petty ores" when one ton of blue mud paid off over $7,000 in gold and silver ores. And although all of the notorious desperadoes and gunmen have long met the ways of Providence, their names still live on in legend, and some are carried by kin folks. Virginia City retains her assorted collection of gamblers, sharpers, coyotes, poets, and jackass rabbits which scamper through the sage on the edge of the mountain city.

The town itself, as it nestles aside Sun Mountain, reflects early Western life from all views. Narrow, ledge-like streets cut through the groups of square-faced, ancient buildings which at one time handled the $900,000,000 in gold and silver bullion that was extracted from the lode. Hitching rails stand in front of saloons and gambling houses. Sidewalks of wood still echo the tap of a high-heel boot. And scattered about are gaping mouths of mine shafts leading to the lode which lies under the town, now guarded by nature's scalding steam.

Though many of the buildings and homes atop the lode have crumpled with age, still others stand to shelter the three hundred some faithful sons of the Comstockers who remain. Some dwellings have grown tired and lean upon the next for support. Others stand firm and to this day several public houses continue to ring out to the music of fiddle and banjo.

So deeply has the spirit of the West been imbued in Virginia City that the feeling is omnipresent. For never in history has there been another mining camp like the diggings aside Sun Mountain. A man might stick a pick into the ground and find a fortune. A washwoman could buy ten feet in the Ophir and retire to Nob Hill and her own carriage. Speculation ran high and the truth was so amazing that it beggared imagination. Shaggy miners who couldn't write their own names became millionaires; shrewd businessmen like Flood, Fair, Stafford, Mackay, Hearst, and Sharon became multi-millionaires.

The wealth which came from the confines of Sun Mountain attracted miners, prospectors, speculators, gunmen, and card sharks from all points of the lawless West. From a handful of whiskered miners who lived in holes scraped from the mountainside, the mining site blossomed into a "mountain city" of over 40,000 residents.

Among these Virginia City had absorbed the best and worst of California's seasoned veterans. Gay, reckless, debonair, the goldseekers took to the trail leading to the lode. Every man was a law to himself, carried in his holster the redress of wrongs. The wildest excesses prevailed. The most brutal crimes went unpunished. No frontier mining camp ever had as great a percentage of murderous lawlessness among its residents, nor as high a level—as we shall see later—of intellect and culture.

For years there was no night at the site located six thousand feet up the side of a mountain. The flare from dancehalls, hurdy-gurdies, honky-tonks, and gambling houses flung splashes of light on the masses of roughly dressed men engaged in continuous revelry. Day and night the narrow ledge streets were crowded. Freight outfits jammed the roads; merry little bells tinkled

It was a fabulous place of "desperadoes, gamblers, sharpers, coyotes, poets, preachers, and jackass rabbits. . . ."

as the mules twitched. A swarm of rough humanity passed back and forth in cross-currents that flowed steadily every hour of the day. Even the shrieking mountain blasts of wind, violent as a tornado at times, never interfered for a moment with the thumping of pianos, the squeaking of fiddles, the stamping of feet on the floors of the dance halls. Life in Virginia City was colorful, turbulent, and incessant.

And there was plenty to drink. Over one hundred and fifty saloons and drinking houses supplied by five local breweries, augmented by a continuous stream of whiskey-bearing pack trains from nearby Carson City and Reno, help quench the thirst of the lively townsfolk.

But more than just drinking went on in the saloons. For in the early days of the West, the saloon was more an institution than it is today. Here men came to meet their friends, transact business, to win or lose a fortune at poker, black jack, monte, or faro.

Such names as *Wimmer's, The Delta, Pay Lynch's, Sawdust Corner, Sazerac, Senate, Crystal Bar,* and others were notably popular with the Comstockers. Today, *Wimmer's, The Delta, Pay Lynch's* no longer exist. But Sawdust Corner, Sazerac, Senate, and the Crystal Bar carry on a colorful tradition.

A man can order his whiskey across the same bar that served Sam Brown, killer

extraordinary. A swaggering, brutal ruffian, florid of face, with red hair and whiskers of the same color which he kept tied in a knot beneath his chin. Or he can stand in the same doorway where gunman Langford Peel stood when he whipped out his pistols and dropped El Dorado Johnny in the middle of C Street. At the *Senate*, now called the *Bucket of Blood* a person can walk across the same wooden floor that caught more falling, bullet-riddled bodies than perhaps any other saloon in the West.

Also at the *Senate* is preserved a large collection of pistols, knives, swords, specimens of ores from famous mines on the lode, pictures of the boys, portraits in gold frames, and an assortment of miscellaneous items left over from the boom days.

The *Crystal Bar* also has an historic collection. Among the items there is a large chunk of "blue mud" which the prospectors once cursed for clogging the screens of their rocker boxes. Later a ton of the "mud" proved to be worth $4,791 in silver and $3,196 in gold. In addition one can see notes in the handwriting of Mark Twain, General Grant, Thomas Edison, R. Valentino, and others who came to the mining camp in Washoe.

Barroom talk is still of gold and prospecting. That is, among the old timers and not among the tourists who of late are conducting week-end sorties to the riggings. During this "invasion time" most old timers collect at the old fire station and let off some "windies." While others sit on the worn benches next to the hitching posts on C Street and observe the bare legs of the visiting "chickadees." But during the early part of the week when the Comstockers have the bars to themselves, the fascinating subject of gold dust is the predominant topic.

Though in aspect, the talk now differs from the language of the early Comstockers. In the 1860's they talked of sensational strikes, new millionaires made in town, and figures in the million brackets. Today they talk of finding good veins overlooked by their fortunate predecessors; of the return of veteran prospectors with a renewed faith in the Comstock; and of "lost" mines of immense wealth.

Stories travel the width and breadth of the bar. They tell of the *Pick and Shovel Mine* which awaits to be rediscovered. The *Lost Skillet Gold Mine*, and the *Lost Piute Mine*, each promise fabulous fortunes to the lucky prospector who stumbles upon them. And there is, of course, the much talked-about *Lost Broyfogle Mine* which, after 80 years of being called a "legend" by some scoffers, was found during November 1945 by two gold seekers who played their luck the right way.

"Shorty," the bartender at the *Crystal*, is a man who plays his luck. Working only long enough to stake himself, the red-faced, ore-wise prospector packs up every few months and takes out after gold dust. At times he returns weary, ragged, and empty handed. While at other times he returns with enough in his pockets to pitch him a two or three-week binge.

In addition to gold dust and tales of hard-crusted gunmen, Virginia City also offers legitimate history. For example, there is the old *Enterprise* building. On the first floor of the buckling wooden building once was located the desk of Mark Twain, reporter for the *Enterprise*. Next to him sat Joe Goodman—the handsome, reckless editor who handled equally well a derringer or pen. Across the room at desks with slanted tops sat such other gun-toting reporters as Dan De Quille and Rollin Daggett.

Directly underneath the editorial room was the staff's private beer garden. When at dawn the noise of the presses had ceased, Mark, Joe, Dan, and Dag—and the devil—would head for the basement. Serenely settled around a huge roundtable, with foaming tankards in hand, they would spin tall yarns and sing war-songs until the sun came up over the desert and the odor of the sage, strong as incense, overpowered the fragrance of the brew.

Today the building stands silent except for the creaking of aging beams. Remnants of machinery and furniture sulk in the shadows; yellow newspapers—some dated 1865—litter the floor. And down below in the cool basement, some say that if a person sniffs intently enough they can detect the still-present odors of the old twelve per cent Comstock brew.

Mark Twain, then known by his real name of Sam Clemens, was an unshaven, roughly clad, unsuccessful prospector with bushy hair when he first crossed the threshold of the *Enterprise* building. Invited to

join the editorial staff of the Comstock newspaper after he had contributed several humorous pieces, Sam washed his face, combed his hair, and started his writing career on C Street.

AT FIRST Sam took the pen name of "Josh". And as he spent time at the riggings he began to develop a vast indifference to news as news. He found that the boys didn't want news. What did they care about murders or accidents? Such horrible incidents were too close to them—too intimate. Daily they were a part of calamity and murder. Sam soon discovered that the boys wanted whimsical rhetoric strong with the tang of the sage. Thus they turned to the *Enterprise* not for news but for something to amuse them.

This, "Josh" and Dan De Quille gave to them in large doses. The more absurd, fantastic, and the closer lies simulated truth, the better the boys like it. They wrote of such purely imaginative accounts as of outraged fossilized snails which bored their way back into the rock foam from which they had been dynamited. Of the "Traveling stones of Pahrangat Valley," and of "solar armor"—a helmet fitted with an ammonia tank, the evaporation of which furnished cold air to neutralize the effects of the desert heat.

Out of this demand for funny stories about Sun Mountain developed one of America's greatest humorists. As "Josh's" articles and burlesques came to be read all over the coast, in addition to the lode, the author searched for some other identity. Thus it was on February 2, 1863 that "Mark Twain" was "born" in Virginia City.

The favorite American writer was not, by far, the only celebrity to walk upon the plank sidewalks of the mountain city. Shortly after Sandy Bowers returned from Europe and the East Coast came a large migration of people of culture and profession. Bowers, one of the first Comstock millionaires, spent over a quarter million dollars on a spree, and his toast, "I've got money to throw at the birds," induced many persons of renown to follow the jovial miner back to the rich mining site in Washoe.

Such an influx raised the level of culture and intelligence at Virginia City far above that of most mining camps of that day. Side by side with the roughest makeshifts, the most primitive of cave dwellings, there existed a civilization which would be satisfied with nothing but the best. If one lucky miner expressed himself with champagne and door stops of gold, another, perhaps as lucky, lifted his eyes to the stars and wrote his soul out with fire-tipped pen. Or another performed unexcelled upon the stage of Piper's Opera House.

It is said that no town of greater contrasts ever existed. Truth in the statement is still strongly apparent—even to an observer standing in the intersection of unpaved B and Union Streets during a spring day in 1946. Time and age has removed the gilt from many of the once sedate houses and such historic public gathering places as Piper's Opera House, but the magnificence that was theirs proudly manifests itself under discolored paint.

Brisk, Western-flavored architecture is symbollic of the fame of the opera house. A flat-faced, Sierra-pine front rises from the dry earth of arid Nevada and reaches skyward for three stories. Small windows puncture the boldness of design. Two full-length bat-wing doors open into a small lobby where guests checked their wraps through a large window, and colts and derringers through a smaller opening.

Leading from the lobby, hardwood stairs curved upward to the mezzanine. Scribed upon the walls of the passageway is a vast number of names. Some famous, others commonplace. Posters also cling to the walls. They tell of the appearances of many popular artists of the day. Jennie Lind, Maud Adams, Houdini, Fay Templeton, Caruso, Lillian Russell, Edwin Booth, Jane Cowl, Tom Thumb, General Grant, Buffalo Bill, Schuman Heink, and many more appeared on the lamp-lighted stage flanked by the double-decked boxes where sat the town's most prominent citizens. Even the swashbuckling Mark Twain stepped upon the stage to enlighten his buddies of the Comstock.

Of the various theatrical attractions that came to the camp, none so fired the imagination of the woman-starved Comstockers as Adah Isaacs Menken. The daring Adah startled the town with the play, "Mazeppa," in which, clad only in pink tights, she rode across the stage of the opera house, lashed

to the back of an unsaddled black stallion.

Mark Twain went to the play intending to scourge it with a caustic criticism in the *Enterprise*. He fell under the spell of Menken's exposed beauty, and her clear, well-modulated voice. He wrote that she rivaled Lola Montez as a siren.

Men of all types were drawn to the flame. Isaac Menken, a wealthy Jew, had married her. So had John C. Heenan, the great heavyweight champion who fought Tom Sayers. Men had shot themselves because of her. She was fire and ice, a passionate lover of life who could be as cold as a marble statue. She fell in love with the wild Nevada camp, as it did with her. Its exuberances matched her own reckless spirit.

Her record in Europe was exceptional. She had played before kings and great Victorian writers were swept from their feet by her. Dickens wrote the introduction to her book of poems. Burne-Jones pictured her. Alexandre Dumas and Swinburne were her lovers. But London and Paris did not hold the fascination in life that she found at Virginia City.

THE FAVORITE among her cavaliers of the West was Tom Peasley, owner of the Sazerac Saloon. He was a leader in a community which harbored a thousand strong minded individualists who openly would admit that they would follow no leader. An amazing athlete, tall, strong, and well-proportioned, he ruled by reason of the force within him. He was reckless and gentle, gay and brave.

Whenever he accompanied Menken, he walked beside her as lightly as if he were treading on air. She danced, played faro, and dined with him.

With so many interesting personalities on the lode, many of the town's wealthiest men decided to build homes at Virginia City. On Howard, Stewart, and Summit Streets —barely two hundred yards from the pulsing heart of the town where gunmen met and drew—stately houses were erected. Hand-carved ornaments decorated the front verandas; fancy wrought-iron fences and gates garnished front yards.

Sparing no expense, the inside of the houses were lavishly furnished. Plush and leather-bound furniture, grand pianos, rose-splashed carpets gilt and crystal chandeliers, Morroco-bound books, exquisite lace —all imported from Europe and Asia.

In time, there developed a society on the streets west of A Street that would rival that of European elite. Gracious ladies waved their hands above their heads to drain the blood so as to present a lily-white hand to a caller. Carriages pulled by prancing, well-groomed horses were used to call upon a neighbor who lived but across the street. Men bowed deeply from the waist—but not deeply enough for their vest-pocket derringers to be dumped upon the ground.

But characteristically, this society was not as strong as the society of the grizzly miner. A majority of the fine houses are not found today. Empty lots mark the place where they stood. Some were dismantled and moved to Nob Hill in San Francisco; others now stand in Reno and Carson City. And those that remain are now occupied by the working sons of the Comstockers.

And perhaps rightfully too! For it has been the generations of the stout, hard-rock miners who have preserved the heart of the once fabulous town rich in color and history—and in stories of fascinating human beings. The miner's undying faith that the lode still has bonanzas to give up has afforded us of the present generation with the opportunity of seeing first hand one of the greatest spectacles to emerge from the history of our wild West.

STOPPING AT YOUR TOWN

BRINGING YOU YOUR AMERICAN HERITAGE

SQUAW MAN

By MICHAEL GILLEN

What was the dark meaning of the strange signs Wap Raeb drew in the dust at the feet of great Chief Ximino?

SAM CLARK'S tan hair reached to bare shoulders and black cavalry boots came above the knees of his buckskins. His blue eyes were plainsman's eyes, with wrinkles at the corners from years of squinting across the Great Grass plains of Nebraska Territory.

He passed the Indians, noticing the marks of the Oglala Sioux on their cheeks, and stopped at a respectful distance from the ring formed by the lesser chiefs and old warriors. Ximino did not look at him, but raised his right hand to within a few inches of his ear. The scout did likewise and lowered his arm when the other did and waited.

His eyes swept the circle of somber, painted faces like a hawk covering a field in one swift glance. They stopped on a figure dressed in white man's clothes, the wrinkles at the corners tightened and held as they might have held a cougar along the sights of a rifle. . . .

He was looking at the man he had seen through the door of Captain George Creel's office when he stood on the porch of the Post Commandant's headquarters the morning before.

The captain's brown sideburns were flecked with grey and reached down his cheeks, nearly touching the wide mustache. Sitting near his desk was the man who

In the young brave's hand was his own knife, and scratched in the dust was a huge foot with five long claws . . .

was acting Indian Agent by temporary appointment of the Post, Wap Raeb.

The agent was a composite of landowner, merchant and politician. His dark eyes and features were fastened on the scout standing outside the open door. The captain was speaking as Sam Clark stepped up to the doorway.

". . . the territory may be a state within another year, Raeb, after that I may be able to influence a permanent appointment through the Indian Bureau in Washington."

Raeb took his eyes off the scout he had been studying and removed the cigar from his mouth. He had a scholarly softness about him and his black hair reached well down to the naps of his neck in well-cared-for-neatness. His voice was deep when he spoke, but it had the smoothness of learning.

"Each year brings more from the congested East," he said slowly. "Homesteaders, outlaws, gamblers—some of the good and all the bad. To be truthful, I hate to see it come."

"Make you a rich man," the captain commented dryly. "I wish I could take up some of the Great Grass land my—" He looked up and saw the scout standing in the door. "Come in, Sam," he said. "You two should know one another; Wap Raeb is starting a Land and Title office in Lashant to handle grants if and when we ever become a state."

Sam's eyes raced over the man questioningly as he absently swept the white dust of the plains off his boots with his hat, noticed the high cheek bones and the face burned by the sun to the color of dark leather. Their eyes locked for a moment and Sam tensed as if sensing something by pure instinct. The agent rose to his feet and stepped toward the door. For a large man his movements were effortless.

"Not leaving?" the captain asked.

"Have some business in Lashant tomorrow," the agent said easily. "I'm riding over tonight, I'll see you when I get back, George." He made the briefest inclination toward the scout and left.

Captain Creel sat up stiffly in his chair, the index finger of one hand toyed with the brown and grey mustache.

"The reason I sent for you, Sam," he began slowly, waiting for the scout's attention.

Sam watched the agent mount a bay horse leathered with a heavily silver trimmed saddle and ride out of the compound. He heard the captain finger-drum a march on the desk.

"Yep, sir," he said, bringing his thoughts back into the room.

"Corporal Dawson and the two troopers with him were due back here two days ago with a report on a meeting of the chiefs of the small tribes in the Black Hills reservation. I don't like it. This is the first breathing spell we've had since the Sioux stopped their warring with the Poncas. If it were not for Mr. Raeb's intelligence and resourcefulness we might have had to move them off the Great Grass plain all together and that would have been a bloody job. I suggest you leave tonight and see what you can learn. Understand?"

"Yep,—sir." Sam leaned a little awkwardly over the captain's desk, his long hair fell past his face and blended with the goatee at his chin.

"Sir, has it never struck you that there is something awfully strange about this very intelligent and resourceful Wap Raeb?"

The captain's fingers beat a cavalry charge on the desk. "Mr. Clark!" he said irritably, "there are some things you probably will never understand. Let me also suggest that you leave Army business to my judgment."

Sam, surprised, answered a little hesitantly. "If you say so, sir," and went out.

Among the several Indians always camped around the Post, he singled out a young brave and took him to one side.

"Lone Bird keeps long watch of white soldiers for Ximino."

The young savage's black eyes were penetrating, he nodded seriously. "Long Hair know why. Lone Bird trusts Long Hair because Ximino say Long Hair good friend."

"Then go now, across Great Grassy plain and see if tribes are gathering. If they are, go to Ximino and tell him that Long Hair says not to listen to white man's words of war, it is a bad white man's trick. If tribes not gathering, come back and wait for Long Hair to return."

Sam withdrew his hunting knife and handed it to the young Indian to show his trust. When the youth was gone he went to the stables and prepared his own brown-and-white pony for a long ride.

BY MORNING Sam was where he could see the Black Hills of Dakota in the distance. His pony drooped under him from the steady pace through the night. His mind was weary of puzzling over the ever possible threat of Indian trouble that is life on the frontier. His practiced reasoning along such lines suggested to him the devilish scheming of some renegade white man to fan the embers of hate into eventual war. But for what?

He thought of Wap Raeb and the strange thing about the man that had affected him like a hate-scent. Had it been an Indian, he would have recognized its treacherous meaning. He was wondering about the office for land grants and the steady trickle of settlers into the west when the pony came to an abrupt stop. They were standing in tall grass on the crest of a knuckle. The land swooped down before him and rounded out in a basin. It had been a lake at one time, now dried and filled with waving grass.

His eyes swept the lowland keenly and detected a depression in the yellow smoothness. It showed darker like a blemish. Slowly he moved the pony forward, keeping his eyes glued to the dim place and saw it disappear in the grass as he descended.

"Something's taken place here not too long ago, old fellow." The pony looked sharply. Slowly they drifted into the low place with the sun behind them. Sam leaned low in the saddle to scrutinize the ground more closely and saw the irregular pattern where the grass was thickest. He saw splotches of brown moving in the yellow waves. He dismounted and pulled some of the blades, putting them to his lips, then wiped his tongue with the back of his hand.

"Blood."

He looked at a spot suggesting that the grass had been pulled up by hand. Getting down on his knees with his face close to the ground he found blades scattered carelessly one place, carefully another, some even stuck painstakingly into the soil. The pony came near, stuck his soft nose down close to the scout's face and breathed warmly against the earth.

Sam cleared the loose grass away and a long, narrow cut came into view. He dug at it gently and a layer of sod, like a block, moved easily. He removed it and another.

When he stepped back, sweating from his labor, he had the bodies of two white men laid out in the sun. The foot of another still protruded from the black earth. They had been stripped of everything that could have been used for identification. He knelt and lifted one foot, wiped the damp soil away from the leg and saw where the hair ceased to grow below the knee from the constant wearing of cavalry leggings; that and the mute bullet holes, nothing else.

For some minutes he looked about him, then scanned the horizon until his eyes rested on the hills to the north where the timber showed green in the sun. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the distance he discerned the slow circling of hawks, noticed that they did not drift with each circling, but continued to hover in the same vicinity.

"Indians up at Lake Totten." The pony moved near at the sound of his voice. Two black specks winged their way toward them in the direct, purposeful flight of crows. As he mounted he watched them. "Nightfall and it'll be coyotes," he reflected absently.

For some minutes his mind hung on the thought of the displaced soil that must have been removed by wagon—not an Indian's method, burying an enemy—yet no white man could have concealed them so well in the soil.

The ground ahead rose steadily from the low basin to rougher terrain. The pony moved at a faster gait out of the high grass, slowed only to circle the wrinkled furrows that became more uneven. He neared the foot of the sloping land that reached to the hills and saw a standing horse with a blanket barely clinging to its back.

Coming closer he recognized the Indian pony. On the ground lay Lone Bird. He got down and turned the body over carefully and found four bullet holes in the

chest. In the young brave's hand was his own knife and on the ground, scratched in the thin dust of the earth, was a strange outline like a huge foot with five long claws. There were other signs, one of a bow that was broken and an arrow bent back upon itself.

Sam Clark knew that a message was crying at him from the still ground, if he could only understand it. He studied the designs long and carefully until they were impressed in his memory. His eyes wandered over the silent landscape and caught something in the sky that held them; little whisps of smoke climbing into the blue expanse from the trees in the Black Hills. He watched them, saw the hawks still circling, and he was challenged to try his hand at a game few white men dared. He mounted and nudged the pony into a lope toward the timbered hills.

AS HE moved through the trees he watched over the pony's head cautiously until he saw the shore of a small lake visible beyond the shadows of the tall firs. Teepees lined the water's edge and Indians moved about in a congested gathering. Silently he slid from the saddle and removed his buckskin shirt, stuffed it into the big hat and pressed them snugly between the stirrup straps. Bare to the waist, he removed his neckerchief and tied it around his left arm above the elbow, putting one end in the pony's mouth to hold while he drew it tight. Then taking his hunting knife he felt deftly along the flesh of the forearm with the flat of the blade for the spot between the big muscle and arm bone. Finding it, he cut carefully into the flesh, feeling the way with the blade until he could shove it through. Blood trickled from his mouth as he sank his teeth into his lips to distract one pain with another.

Now he walked boldly into the Indian camp, the pony moving solemnly behind. Indians of mixed ages and sizes spread out before him, only to close tightly behind him, crowding, their faces a crazy quilt of conflicting expressions. Some clasped rifles in their folded arms and stood in his path regarding him in stunned silence; but when they saw the bleeding arm and recognized the sign, they moved aside.

He searched their faces as he passed, studying the painted marks on their cheeks and knew that it was a calling of the small tribes for a war council.

He saw many Indians sitting cross-legged on the ground before a large white wigwam. On an elk hide, Ximino, chief of the Oglala Sioux sat alone. He was in ceremonial dress and seemed to be gazing at something across the lake, unmindful of the approaching white man, but he raised his right hand to within a few inches of his ear.

Then he saw Wap Raeb standing with some lesser chiefs and older warriors. Wap was staring at Sam.

Waneoka, the medicine man, stood up. His dried, wrinkled face was unpainted and he wore albino buck. On his head two black buffalo horns were set in a cap of white fur. He made a sign for the scout to enter the circle, and Sam came to within a few feet of him and Ximino, so that the three formed a triangle in the center of the council ring. The medicine man's eyes, like black beads, were fixed upon the knife sticking through the white man's arm.

Sam stooped and rested one knee on the ground. Then, placing the stabbed arm across his thigh, he slowly withdrew the knife, while the Indian looked intently at him—not at the hand removing the knife, but at his face, watching the movement of every muscle. Sam cleaned the blade against his chest and laid the knife on the ground before him. From his waist, Waneoka drew his own and laid it besides the scout's.

At this, Ximino turned his full attention to Sam with a look which implied that now was the time to speak. Sam remained in the position so that one knee rested on the ground. Slowly, with deliberate gestures, he started his parley, shaping each sign carefully with hands and fingers. With studied inflection and expression, he added a word here and there.

"I have looked into the shallow pools when the waters were still," he told them slowly, "and I saw many things that were good. Now the waters are muddied and no one can see, but there is the mark of a white man's hand."

Ximino stared at the earth for some time, then raised himself to a position

similar to the scout's, with one knee on the ground.

"Others have also seen these things," he signed. "It was the sign of things that are to come because the white man does not keep his pledge with his red brother."

Sam answered: "This is the bad talk of a white man, not of wise Ximino."

The big chief shook his head in denial. Sam tried again. "A white man has spilled blood and made poison in the waters where once the white man and his red brother drank together."

Again Ximino shook his massive head. "There is no white man."

"You have listened to a bad voice and stole the white man guns which you can not shoot. It is a white man's trap," Sam argued. "Only a white man sets a trap for his own brother, you and all your warriors will be as sticks against the white man's soldiers. A white man wants your land for his so when his people are thick as the locust, he will make the land bring him great white-man's wealth."

XIMINO got up and walked back and forth, his head down. When he looked down at Sam again his face was like burnished copper in the sun. Straight and tall, his broad shoulders, in the many-colored ceremonial robe, carried all the tradition of the great warrior chiefs who had been his ancestors. Tiredness showed in his deep brown eyes and in the slow, measured signs of his speech: "Long have I wished that you were my brother. Your words are as my own. But what is to come has been whispered to the winds and what has been done no white man can undo." He gestured toward the north, where the hills reached upward; then to the other directions, taking in all the plains. "All this was our fathers' hunting ground. When there were no arrows in the air and no war clouds in the sky, my people gave to your people the buffalo to hunt and the land on which to live; now my people must take back these things—I have spoken."

Sam knew, as men of the west frontier did know, that one day this thing must come. The sheltered East and its unhealthy civilization would make it so.

Wap Raeb sat with his eyes fixed on the scout, his face expressionless. The butts of revolvers stuck up like prongs at either side of his folded legs. Sam looked at the man sitting in quiet confidence and felt the futility of one who tries to strike at an unseen enemy in darkness. His eyes unconsciously settled on the pistols and in the moment of relaxed tension something fell into place in his mind. Slowly he began to form into signs the thoughts that had been moving elusively through his brain.

"Lone Bird was your brother and my friend," he began. "He is dead only because he tried to warn you against those who whispered cunning words. You whose land is so precious to the white man are driven from it. None of you understand the white man's way." He stopped his parley and deftly picked up his knife from the ground, rose to his feet. His arm moved like an uncoiling whip and sent the knife flying, it buried itself to the hilt at the feet of Wap Raeb, inches from the man's boot.

The man did not flinch, not a line in the well-groomed features so much as moved; only the glistening eyes betrayed that inside his mind was racing. He knew the meaning of the attention that had suddenly been turned toward him. Ground had been broken before him and he had to speak. Slowly, languidly, he drew one leg under the other so that one knee rested on the earth. He made his speech with cool deliberation.

"The man with the light hair is as changeable as the sky his eyes reflect. I know him little and I trust him none. He is a white man who speaks with two faces. I say, never let them become thick as the locust over—" He fumbled a sign. Sam saw it as quick as the others.

"Over whose land?" the scout's voice had the sound of slow burning gunpowder. He stared down at the kneeling agent and the Indians knew his meaning. Sam pulled his knife from the ground at the man s side and went to the center of the circle. On the ground he drew the signs that were by Lone Bird's body. Then, to the old warriors and chiefs, to Waneoka and Ximino, he pounded out his final parley in the frenzy of a war dance.

"The red man does not slay his brother with the white man's weapon. This was the message Lone Bird left that his broth-

ers might know why he was killed and by whom. The dying speak only in the one true voice. Let those among you who are wise—" He stopped at a sign from the medicine man.

Ximino was staring at the marks on the ground. From dark eyes to dark eyes a silent message went around the deathly quiet circle. Two shadows moved slowly along its outer edge. Ximino turned his eyes on Wap Raeb, calling him by a name that made the scout's eyes widen.

The Sioux chief did not speak in the language of signs now, but in the Chawtaw of his tribe which Sam could barely follow.

"Many winters ago," said Ximino in a hard, brittle voice; "Squawman, friend of our fathers, brought among us you who was born with full white-man's rights that we might bend the wisdom of the paleface to our good. We had faith in you. We sent you far into the land where the sun rises to learn the strange ways of a strange people. You learned too well, Wap Raeb."

Sam saw Wap Raeb's hands move ever so slightly toward the guns at his side, then he saw the two braves kneeling behind, waiting.

Waneoka turned his back to the scout. Ximino had returned to his cross-legged position on the elk hide and was gazing across the lake. Thus, in their fashion, they dismissed him.

SAM stepped from the circle. The savages gathering around Wap Raeb slowly shut the scene from him. He went to his pony and mounted without anyone noticing.

As he reached the clearing where the land leveled out to the Great Grass plains, the sudden beat of hoofs came up behind him. Sam reined his pony around as a young brave approached, leading the bay horse with the silver trimmed saddle. The Indian extended his arm, holding the reins. "Ximino say you take." It was Wap Raeb's horse.

From his desk Captain Creel could see the square of the compound beyond the hitching rail, and across to the officers' barracks. He saw the scout ride in, covered with the white alkali dust of the plains, and leading a bay horse—saw the three bodies, black with dirt, secured across the animal's back, and noticed too, the tired composure of the scout as he came out of his saddle and headed toward the steps. He knew he would not start dusting himself until he was well in the office.

Sam beat himself all over with his hat and looked down through the cloud at the captain's straining face. "Ximino called a war council all right, sir, the tribes are still gathering. I think I hand talked 'em out of the notion for the present, but Washington ought to know that it's coming, sir, and it's going to be a big one when it does. Ximino is at Lake Totten now, I'd suggest that you take the troop up there and make some big treaty-talk." Sam's arm started to give him some pain and he tugged at the neckerchief at his elbow. With a swing of his long hair, he motioned beyond the door.

"I have the bodies of Corporal Dawson, Trooper Spriggs and Trooper Brannan out there. There were no signs of struggle. Musta' been someone who could approach without arousing any suspicion. Someone like—"

"That horse you brought in?" the captain interrupted impatiently. "Isn't that Wap Raeb's?"

"Yep, you'll see him there too, but staked out. You should of looked at that polecat's name backwards."

The captain raised an eyebrow stiffly to consider the scout's remark and tone. He looked at Sam.

"Go ahead; write it down," Sam persisted. "If you had ever got him that appointment . . . sir."

With some skepticism, the captain scribbled the name on a pad, then slowly started reversing it.

"I'm going to have doc fix my arm; you going to go to that pow-wow?"

The captain was looking at what he had written. He knew there were some things he'd never understand. He nodded his head without looking up. "If you say so, Sam."

Suddenly a section of the roof caved in!

YOU CAN'T BURY A TRAPPER

By LEE FLOREN

Not when a gunslick like Mack Jones has a pelt-fortune cached in the graveyard—and a willowy squaw in the cookshed!

ALTHOUGH it was early March, spring had come to Montana. Cottonwoods were in bloom and wild-roses glistened along the river. Mack Jones had taken a short-cut through the underbrush. He came unexpectedly upon two men digging a grave.

"How," he said. He settled on his haunches and let the elkskin straps of his fur-pack slide from his thin shoulders. That pack held his entire catch of winter fur and it was heavy. He had shaved that morning and now in late afternoon his face had become blue with the light stubble of his whiskers.

He looked at the two men.

One man was big and wore greasy

buckskins. His face was wide and his heard was jet-black. "An unpleasant chore, stranger." He was scowling as though irritated by Mack Jones' sudden appearance.

Mack Jones looked at the other man. He was a short, dour man of about fifty, with a broken nose and thick lips. He took his gaze back to Black Beard, then looked at the dead man who lay a few feet away, sprawled on his side.

"Injun dead, huh?"

Black Beard said, "A Gros Ventres."

Mack Jones picked a spear of green bluejoint and chewed on it. This buck had been knifed through the belly and chest. He got to his feet and looked toward the raw logs of the new Milk River trading post, a half-mile away in the cottonwoods and boxelders along the river's south bank.

"Post open?" he asked.

Black Beard nodded. "Ike Gilford's ready to buy from his new tradin' post." He peered at Mack carefully. "You bin sick, ain't you?"

"Smallpox. Killed my squaw."

Black Beard said, "You'll get another. Injun squaws are easy to get." He went back to digging.

Mack Jones didn't like them. They looked like hangers-on who had tied themselves to Ike Gilford's new trading post. He didn't know Ike Gilford. Usually he traded his peltry in at Lewistown down on the Musselshell.

But Many Eagles lay buried back there in the Wilderness of the Little Rockies. And unrest and sorrow had pulled on him and sent him from his trapping grounds a full month ahead of time. He had decided to leave the Little Rockies where he had trapped for six years. He was going north into Canada and trap in the Wood Mountain region. He had sold his traps to a Blackfoot halfbreed and had given him his cabin. He had taken one long last look at Many Eagle's grave and had turned his moccasins toward the new post here on Milk River.

He had a tight spot on his spine. That dead buck had been knifed . .. But mayhap the Indians had got into a fight. If Ike Gilford would give him good barter for his plews he would go empty-handed to the Wood Mountains. There he would spend a lazy summer scouting the location of beaver-runs and beaver-dams and look for sign of mink and marten and weasel. He would try to forget the grave in the Little Rockies.

If Gilford didn't meet his terms, he'd go on east to Fort Peck on the Missouri, some forty miles to the east. He still had a month to barter in before his pelts would start to slip their fur.

He stopped on the edge of a clearing. Foxtail grass grew knee-high and he looked across it at the post with its newly-peeled logs glistening in the sun. This post was bigger than he had expected. Beyond the high log wall he could see a main building that seemed to be built around a patio. Ike Gilford had spent a lot of work on this outpost for fur-men.

He had expected to see a few Sioux or Gros Ventres teepees around the gate, but there was none. Usually the Indians camped around the outside walls while they traded furs for tobacco and salt and whiskey. But maybe it was too early for the tribes to come in; he was a month ahead of the regular trappers.

The gate, a heavy affair hanging on thick, buffalo-hide hinges, was open and he went in, coming to the patio that had its soil already marked hard by moccasins and boots. A black fire-pot hung on a contraption over a pit. He walked under the overhang of a building, heading for the main post at the far end of the fort. Then he saw the squaw, sitting cross-legged on the soil beside a wall, her head in her hands.

She was young; her body was lithe, thin. Her black hair was put in braids that hung across her shoulders. She had a yellow buckskin blouse and a buckskin skirt and her small feet had buckskin moccasins that were laced high and trimmed with porcupine quills.

She did not hear him; or, if she did, she did not look up. Mack Jones wondered if her face were as pretty as her slender body and he squatted and said softly, "How, Miss."

She jerked up her head and terror ran across her brown eyes. Her lips were swollen and her high cheek puffed and later on that eye would be black.

"Who are you?" She spoke in Gros Ventres.

"I'm a trapper. My name is Mack Jones. You have been beaten?"

"We came yesterday. Last night they killed my father. They knifed him and now somewhere they bury him. Then they beat me—" She put her head into her hands again; her shoulders shook with sobs.

ANGER ROILED its muddy path through Mack Jones. He knew now what he had suspected—he had blundered upon Black Beard and the small man digging that grave: they had not wanted him to see the dead Indian, but he had blundered on the spot while taking the short-cut from his canoe across the bend of the Milk.

He got to his feet. "Who beat you, squaw?"

Before she could answer a harsh voice called, "Now who t'hell are you?"

The man who spoke was enormous. He came out of the trading-post store, walking across the log floor of the porch with a lumbering, thick gait. His dull blue eyes appraised Mack Jones from behind a heavy, wide nose. Jones figured he was around fifty-five or so.

"I'm Mack Jones. I trapped in the Little Rockies."

The man stopped. "Come inside and barter, Jones. Have a drink of good whiskey. I'm Ike Gilford." He jabbed a thumb at the squaw. "Just forget you ever seen her, savvy?"

Mack Jones didn't like him, either. He shrugged and followed the giant inside the store. "What happened to her?"

"Slip outa your pack," Ike Gilford said. He went behind the bar and poured two jiggers of whiskey and put the bottle back under the logs. "Her an' her pa came in the other day. He got drunk and raised hell; got hold of a knife. Me, I don't let Injuns have firewater, but he got into my cache. We had to pertect ourselves."

Mack Jones could see the squaw through the open door. "Did you report the killing to the agency at Mission Canyon?"

"Hell, he's jus' an Injun!"

Again anger ripped through Mack Jones. New Eagles had been only an "Injun" too but a more faithful wife a man could never have. He knew now there was something rotten at this post. He wished he had pushed by and gone to Fort Peck. He caught Ike Gilford looking at his pack, sitting on the bar.

"Got any good fur, Jones?"

"Some."

The giant put his lazy eyes on Mack Jones' rifle. "One of them new ones, huh, that shoot one bullet after another? Where's you get it?"

"Green river rendezvous."

Gilford nodded, eyes almost shut. "You've been sick, huh? You look too damn' thin, fella."

"Smallpox."

Gilford's eyes widened a little. "How long ago?"

Mack Jones' smile was thin. "Two months ago. Don't worry, I don't carry it any longer. You can rest on that." He was suddenly tired. The trek had been long; he should have bypassed this post. That dead buck—the squaw's father—should have warned him of trouble—and of danger—here at this post. For when a man has knife-wounds in him it means there is trouble ahead.

"You're my first customer," Ike Gilford said. "That is, the first white man—that dead Injun don't count."

They drank. Mack Jones looked again at the squaw.

"Don't get no ideas." Ike Gilford's words were rough. "She's my woman, now. Go pick on another one."

Mack Jones wanted to plant a fist in the beefy mouth.

"I heard you."

"We got a room for you," Gilford said. "We got good grub, too. We'll barter come mornin', when you've rested and slept good. What kind of pelts you got?"

"Mostly marten. Black marten."

"Worth powder and balls," Gilford murmured.

Mack Jones corrected him. "Silver and gold, fella. I take mine in hard money. Otherwise, they go to Go Fort Peck or Fort Union."

"We'll talk it over come tomorrow." The big man rapped with his fist on the counter and a heavy squaw came out of a side-room. Gilford rattled words to her in Sioux and Mack Jones found out her name was Rocky Pine and that she would prepare food for him. She nodded dully,

looked at the trapper, then went back into the room.

Thirty minutes later he was seated at a table enjoying well-cooked prairie chicken and baked potatoes. He could see the store-section and as he watched Black Beard and his companion came in, carrying their shovels.

"We got that Injun planted," Black Beard growled.

Ike Gilford said, "We got our first customer."

The little grave-digger took a drink from the bottle. "We saw him when we put this buck to sleep for good. He cut across through the brush and stumbled on us. We thought it was you a-comin' at first."

They came in, nodding to Mack Jones, and sat at the far end of the big table. They started eating. Once Jones caught Black Beard looking at him. When Jones caught his eye, Black Beard looked down at his grub.

There was something wrong at this post. Jones knew that definitely. He'd play his cards close, wait until night, then pull out with his peltry. These coyotes were fur pirates. They had established this post to rob trappers of their peltry. Furs were high down in St. Louis and if they only robbed five or six trappers— They'd have a stake made.

Suddenly he remembered the young squaw. He remembered her small, beaten face, the terror in her brown eyes. Hell, it was no business of his. But still, her image pestered him, ran through his mind.

He got to his feet. He shouldered his pack and went into the store. Ike Gilford was in a big arm-chair sitting beside the door. He looked sleepy under his thick exterior but Mack Jones got the impression he was wide-awake and alert.

Jones said, "I want some eatin' tobacco."

Gilford did not get out of the chair. He called for Rocky Pine who waddled out of her kitchen and waited on Mack Jones. He bought some Star and a little rock candy and looked at Gilford. "I'd like to wash up a little, fella. Which room can I have?"

"Foller me."

Gilford rose with a great heaviness. Rocky Pine had started for the door to show Mack Jones the way, now she stopped and stood silent as they passed. Jones got the feeling that the squaw had wanted to show him his room. Had she wanted to get him alone to talk to him?

They went out into the patio with Jones carrying his plews and his rifle, with Ike Gilford waddling ahead. The young squaw had left the patio. Jones thought, "And now where is she at?" But he did not ask Ike Gilford.

They crossed the strip and Gilford opened a door that revealed a single room. The fat man lumbered inside and lit the buffalo-tallow candle, for dusk was getting heavy.

"See you come mornin', Jones."

Jones shut the door behind Gilford's back. He heard the man shuffle across the patio and heard his voice in the store. He bolted the door, sliding shut the hardwood bar, and he sat on the bed that consisted of strips of buffalo-hide strung tightly on a heavy frame made of cottonwood.

The yellow flicker of the candle showed on his thin, dark face. He could pull out, but what about the squaw? He knew he would never be happy if he sneaked away from this post and left her to suffer her fate.

Jones walked outside. He intended to look around and see if he could see the beaten squaw. But Black Beard Beard came out of the shadows that lay deep along the porch. He said, "You need anything, Jones?"

Mack Jones knew then he was being watched. He had left his plews in his room. They wanted them. He hunkered beside the door. "Not a thing, fella. Just a little night air."

"See you come morning."

Black Beard went into the store. The door was open and the yellow candle-light showed Ike Gilford still in his rocking-chair by the door. Black Beard sat on a stool by the counter. Mack Jones could not see the short fellow, Black Beard's fellow gravedigger. Black Beard had called him by the name of Hank at the table. Where was he, anyway?

The gates had been pulled shut. Mack Jones knew they would be padlocked and the only way a man could leave the post was climb the stockade. Cottonwood logs,

twenty feet high, had been split and placed upright, making a formidable barrier against anybody entering, or leaving the post, by any other means than the gate.

SITTING there, Mack Jones realized he had blundered into real danger. Ike Gilford had said they would barter in the morning. He had a hunch he'd never see daylight. He went back into his room and barred the door again. Taking his pack, he slid into the straps; he jacked his rifle open, and he saw the candle-light reflect on the brass cartridge. He closed the breech.

Using the stock as a club, he knocked the oilskin pane out of the window, and slid outside. He had a hunch that Hank was stationed behind the building. And this hunch proved correct.

The man did not come out and challenge him. Mack Jones pressed himself against the dark base of the log building and looked hard at the brush that lay between him and the wall, some thirty feet away. Then he dived into the thick buckbrush, moving rapidly in the darkness.

He had glimpsed the small man standing in the brush, almost hidden by the under-growth and the darkness. A bullet sang out suddenly, its roar beating against the stockade and echoing against the buildings. Mack Jones knew that it had not come close. He did not shoot in return. The night covered him and he stood still.

There was a trail here that ran along the wall. He waited, rifle raised. Moccasins came with a swift rush and the rifle lowered savagely. Mack Jones struck with a hard anger beating inside of him. The short man gave an ugly grunt and dropped to the ground.

Out in the patio, he could hear the voices of Black Beard and Ike Gilford, hurrying toward him. He had a sudden plan. He shouldered the small man and carried him back to the window, running with his burden. When he had clubbed out the pane, the entire casing had fallen to the ground.

He pushed Hank inside and crawled in after him. He reached down and grabbed the pane and casing and pulled them into the window. He hooked the frame inside by the bullhide thongs and tied it fast. From the outside a man would never think the window had been opened.

He could hear Gilford and Black Beard in the brush behind the cabin. He grabbed for Hank's pulse and waited, feeling for a heart-beat. There was none. He rolled the dead man under the bed and boldly walked out into the patio.

The clearing lay under the thin moonlight. He crossed it, carrying his plews on his back, toting his rifle. He went into the store and crossed it and entered the kitchen. The heavy squaw, Rock Pine, was cleaning the big stove with a dirty rag. She heard him and turned and watched him with slow eyes.

He said. "Where's the young squaw?"

"What you talk about?" She used Sioux.

He grabbed her arm and twisted it sharply. He heard her muscles protest. "Tell me, quick. Tell me or I kill you like I killed Hank."

He put on more pressure. He hated to torture her. But he had to get his information quickly. Soon Ike Gilford and Black Beard would start looking for him. They were still back in the brush.

He raised his rifle with his free hand. He swung it up into her belly and pulled back the hammer. The squaw's eyes were bright with naked fear and her lips trembled wildly.

"She in end room. End of patio. By gate."

Jones let her loose. "Where is the key to the gate?"

"Ike Gilford got. He got big lock with chain. You can't go out there. He kill you for your furs like he killed the Indian!"

MACK JONES was running down the patio, keeping to the darkness made by the overhang of the buildings, moccasins silent in the dust. He came to the door and knocked hard on it. The scared voice of the young squaw sent anger again through him.

"Who there?"

"Me, Jones. The trapper. I came for you."

The door opened. "What happened? I hear shot. They call for Hank. This is a trick. What you white man do with me?"

"I killed Hank. We got out of here. Hurry."

She was sobbing. Terribly, deeply. He grabbed her and shook her and her shoulders were firm under his fingers. He remembered the shoulders of Many Eagles—she slept now in eternal silence. This knowledge was sick and leaden in him, as it had been so many times in the last few months. He and this young squaw had both known the imprint of death on them. And it had marked them with its deep, reverent mark.

"How we get out, trapper?"

"We'll get a rope. We'll lasso the top of a stockade-pillar and climb out. Come, hurry."

"I know where we get rope." Her voice sounded hopeful now.

They ran across the clearing. Mack Jones hoped that Ike Gilford and Black Beard would search a while longer for Hank.

But such was not the case. Already the two puzzled men were entering the patio clearing. Black Beard hollered, "There goes that trapper with the squaw, Ike!" and a rifle sent a ball whamming into the logs as Jones and the girl ran into the store.

Inside, the squaw stumbled, fell. Mack Jones thought at first the ball had found her. He was one knee on the log floor, his repeating rifle up to his shoulder. He sent one bullet into the patio, and he heard Black Beard curse. The lead cleared the space, sending Gilford and Black Beard back into the shadows for safety.

"You hurt, squaw?"

"No. I fell over door-sill, I guess. Rope in this room."

She was running into a side-room. Mack Jones waited with his rifle ready. A ball came through the window, splitting the oilskin. But it was too far away for danger. He realized the odds for once were in their favor.

They had turned the tables by getting control of the store. Here were balls and powder for the rifles of Black Bear and Ike Gilford. The men could not get behind the building for it sat almost flush to the wall. Mack Jones knelt there and grinned, hidden behind the jamb of the door.

The girl seemed to be taking a terribly long time: he called to her and got a muffled reply in return. Now a heavy shadow blackened the door that led to a side-room and he put his rifle-sights on it. It was the big squaw, Rocky Pine.

"What do you do here?"

"I go out to my man."

Mack Jones snorted. "Your man, hell! What does he care about you? You work and he has a young squaw."

"I go?"

"Get out!"

The heavy woman waddled out of the front door. Somewhere Black Beard shouted, "Here he comes, Ike!" The man's rifle roared and Mack Jones glimpsed the squaw as she was falling, Black Beard's ball in her chest. Then he heard her fall to the porch outside his range of vision.

"I hit your squaw," Black Beard called. "She came out the door—"

"There are more squaws. Get that trapper an' his furs. To hell with Rocky Pine—"

Mack Jones wished he could see the men hidden in the darkness along the buildings. But the shadows grouped and gathered there and build up a ark barrier against eyesight. The young squaw came and settled beside him.

He said, "You got the rope?"

"He had some pieces in there. I had to tie them. That took me so long. What happened to Rocky Pine?"

He told her about the fat squaw's death and saw the color leave the girl's face. In a moment her face regained its color.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"White Feathers."

Suddenly he put his arm around her and pulled her in and kissed her on the lips. Her body was firm and hard against his and she was silent as she squatted beside him.

He told her he thought they were trapped. The candlelight revealed her slow nod as that realization crept up on her. She had a butcher-knife that she found in the store-room. It was a wicked-looking knife with a long thin blade, and evidently it had been used for boning buffalo meat.

He knew she carried it for two reasons: the first for protection and the second for self-destruction. And he did not blame her for this thought. Ike Gilford was ruthless and her life with him, especially because of her fight against him this night, would be a life of beating and hardship.

"What do we do, trapper?"

He was grinning again, grinning with a boyishness that left his thin face quiet, put color into his sunken eyes. "We can't go out; they'll kill us. They're waiting for that. They're either waiting for us to go out this door or one of the windows, and if we don't go tonight, then they'll have us in the daylight."

"They would kill us easy then. They would sneak to the windows."

A rifle-ball smashed into the door-jamb close to him and put splinters across his buckskin-clad thigh. The girl was right. They couldn't walk out—and they couldn't wait until daylight.

"We'll go up," he said hoarsely.

"What you mean?"

"You watch by window?"

He gave her his rifle and she settled down under a window. He had slammed the door closed and bolted it. He ran into the side-room and down the dining hall, coming to the kitchen. There was a door here but it led like the other, directly into the patio and into the rifles of Black Beard and Ike Gilford.

He had checked and made sure there was no way out. He grabbed an axe and climbed up on the counter, where he backed at the heavy logs that supported the sod roof.

ONE THING was in their favor: the oilskin windows would not let a man look in from the outside. Suddenly White Feathers shot twice. The candlelight showed her smile as she jacked in a fresh cartridge. He saw her white teeth and dark face, and the marks from Ike Gilford's fists.

She spoke in Sioux. "Black Beard, he shoot. I see his gun make red. I shot him, I know. I hope I killed him."

Mack Jones panted, "Watch close, girl!"

She resumed her watch at the window. She had ripped out part of the oilskin, there at the bottom of the pane, and she was using this for a peep-hole. Sweat ran down Mack Jones' back as he worked with his doube-bitted axe. The weakness of his long smallpox siege was in every fiber of his body.

Still he swung the axe, burying it deep in the logs, some of which were at least a foot and one-half thick. He felt sick and as nausea crept over him he almost fell from the counter. His shoulder-muscles ached and throbbed and threatened to quit. But he drove himself on.

Once on top, they would have a chance. They'd get the rope over a log and they'd climb up. He swung the axe again and sod trickled down on him. He realized then that his bit had gone through.

He couldn't work harder. He looked at the big clock. He'd been at it only five minutes. It seemed like five years. The logs were flinty-dry and stubborn. Suddenly a section of the roof caved in so fast he could hardly jump back to escape the sod.

"Come, girl," he shouted.

Jones took the rifle. Still carrying his plews, he pushed her, rope and all, through the hole and onto the roof. She was gone and he ran to the window and stuck the rifle out and fired four times, at a spot where he thought Black Beard was hiding.

No bullets answered. He pulled his rifle back and thought, "The squaw must be right—she must've killed Black Beard."

She should have had time by now. She should be over the wall and on the other side. He jumped on the counter, picked up a rifle lying there, and threw it at the candle. The rifle crashed into the stick of buffalo-tallow and knocked it into a can of kerosense that had evidently been brought up from St. Louis by Missouri river boats. The can went off the counter and its liquid jetted out on the floor. The candle went with it. Soon flames were sweeping the room.

Mack Jones was already through the hole in the roof. Although he moved fast, the flaming kerosene had moved faster—one oilskin window was burning, lighting the patio. A glance told him the rope hung nearby. The squaw had looped a log and had climbed the rope and now she was on the other side—

He started up, hand over hand. He had about fifteen feet to climb, for the stockade was higher at this point. And then the flames below threw him in clear relief, hanging there on the rope.

One rifle spoke. It was the rifle of heavy Ike Gilford. Mack Jones felt his left arm go numb as the ball tore through

his forearm. He was five feet from the top.

He swung against the rope, and this made the next ball miss. He slipped a little, burdened by his rifle and pack. He lunged up and hooked a leg over the top of the stockade. From there, he fired.

Ike Gilford had moved out of his hiding place, running into the clearing. Gilford seemed to run into an invisible wall. He dropped his rifle and slid forward hard on his face.

Then Mack Jones landed on the ground outside the stockade. He landed hard and White Feathers got him to his feet. "My hand, it gets blood from you?"

"My arm. Run, squaw. There's powder in there and it'll explode. My canoe is on the bend."

They ran through the buck-rush.

"Gilford?" She panted the name.

"He's dead. My lead stopped him."

He was hunkered by the river, washing his shoulder, when the fort exploded.

The squaw bound his shoulder-wound with the bark of fresh diamond-willows, stripping it with the boning-knife she still carried. He pulled on his buckskin jacket and laid his furs in the bottom of his canoe.

He asked, "Where do you go?"

"I go with you."

He was serious and quiet. "I had a squaw. A good squaw, the best in God's land. She is dead now. She sleeps in the Little Rockies. She loved me—she made buckskins for me."

"She would want you to be happy, White Man."

He put his good hand on her shoulder and she came close against him. "We will sell our furs at Fort Peck," he said. "The Father there will marry us. Then we will go to Wood Mountain."

Then, he kissed her, knowing fully that he had found another squaw—as true and as loyal as the one he had lost.

ANOTHER TORCH OF LIBERTY

American Sports with its spirit of cooperation play an important part in Our American Heritage. The building of youth's spirit and body is a contribution which American Sports have always made to the American form of life.

"NESTERS WON'T FIGHT BACK"

By GIFFORD P. CHESHIRE

McCabe was a brutal, brawling son of a trail-bum. Cherry was a sweet clodbuster belle. On the wild Oregon trek, no 'steader's jealous fist could keep them apart!

BY THE TIME FATHER GOT US to the *dalles,* where the Columbia bends into last and worst mountains on the Oregon Trail, several more of his fruit sprouts were snapping dry in his fingers. Cherry and I watched him count and break them one by one, slowly, knowing they were dead but hating to prove it.

My sister and I looked at each other and at the place and at the sky. We knew we would stay here till father had soaked the lot of them to healthy springiness again. We had done it at every crossing from the Missouri to the John Day, which we had forded two days before. Two thousand miles was quite a distance to transplant a young orchard, but that's what father had been doing, hopping it

from water to water across the prairies.

Crowded as we were by winter, Cherry and I still had felt sorry for father each time he had to throw away some of his saplings. Of the nine hundred young family yield nursery whips with which we had started—all of them some Gilfillan variety—a fifth lay scattered behind us, never to root nor blossom. Yet each time father would look at the rest, as now, and say, "We're getting through with the bulk of them, children. Plenty of good stock left. It won't hurt us." And he would grow cheerful again, his mind miles and years ahead of his body, so that present difficulties were of little importance.

We camped at the edge of the river, west of the missions at this place. There was an emigrant party there ahead of us, but it was very late in the '44 migration, and they hurried off by raft the next morning, sending oxen and horses over the Indian trail along the bluffs of the gorge to the Williamette Valley. I felt loneliness sweep into the place when they left us, in spite of the few mission people still here. I did not like falling so far behind the main movement, yet we got farther and farther in the rear.

That had not seemed to worry father at any point since Belleville. We had got used to eating dust, to seeing the big wagon trains lumber into smallness to the west and then vanish. We had learned to expect the trains looming behind to overtake us and go on. That hadn't worried Cherry and me, either, until winter began to build its signs in the nipping night air and less lustrous daylight, or the more cogent fact that we'd turned our tattered calender to November better than two weeks before.

We helped father unload the trees from the wagon. The bed held a foot-deep layer of good Missouri bottom soil, so often sprinkled it had caked. It had not been changed because father was afraid of earth he did not know. We layed the trees on the bank of the river with their thirsty roots deep in the water. That done, father's one worry left him and, as always when nothing troubled him, he got acquainted with the strangers about him and began to talk fruit industry. His more or less involuntary listeners in this case were the two other straggler parties that came and went in the next days, and the local mission folks. Cherry and I joked that he would presently have to start on the Wasco Indians, who were fairly thick around this place, and who would soon be the only ones left.

THEN ONE afternoon a lone man in an ox-cart came rolling along this rugged terminus of the Oregon Trail. I was the first to see him, for I had hiked a considerable distance up the river from our camp for a closer look at the stretched-out rapids that broke the Columbia below the Deschutes River and continued almost to the portal of the gorge. The first thing I heard from Garnet Rigdon was his whistling, which was audible even above the rumble of his cart as it broken over a nearby rocky rise. I was five or six miles east of camp and hoped for a ride, so I waved at him as he approached, and he pulled up. He grinned at me.

"Howdy, bub. Settlement hereabouts?"

"No, sir. We're camped down by the missions, and I came up to see the river splash on the rocks."

"If you're going back, hop in."

As I climbed into place beside him, I saw that Garnet's jeans were bloused over worn cowhide boots and caked with half-dried mud. He had a blue bandanna knotted at his throat, above a torn jumper. His shaggy yellow hair crisped beneath the broad rim of his flat plainsman's hat. I was eighteen, with all my growth, but his wide shoulders lifted much higher than mine.

We told each other our names, and he said he was from Iowa Territory, heading for the Williamette Valley as we were, hankering for one of those Scot-free donation land claims the settlers were taking up. Moving from wilderness to wilderness, he said. He had a plough and several sacks of seed wheat, but I could see precious little else. Garnet noticed my guarded scrutiny and laughed.

"I got a sure-late start, Gay, and I lit out light. Come down with the ague two days before I was set to roll, the first time. But I figured it close and smart, and here I am. I'll beat winter. How come you're dallying, boy? You're a long way from the valley."

"Only about a hundred miles," I said, with a jerk of my head. That was noth-

ing when we had already put a couple of thousand behind us.

Garnet chuckled. "Know anything about those last hundred miles?"

"Why, I guess we have to raft to get our stuff down. There's a cattle trail to drive the animals over. Father hasn't said yet, but I expect he'll make me drive the oxen while he and Cherry float the trees. I'd sure like to run a raft."

Garnet looked at me closely. "Cherry? That's a pretty name."

"She's my sister. Father doesn't think much about anything but fruit grafting. But he couldn't find a tree to name me for. Least not one that mother would allow."

"He a farmer?"

"No, sir. A professor. He taught horticulture back home. He got to reading about the Oregon country. He's certain God made it for fruit. Mother always kept him settled, but when she died he got pretty restless and finally we started out." I liked this man with the easy grin and slow, considered, thrifty speech. It gave me an idea. "Say, how are you going down?"

Garnet looked at me closely, and I saw his guard come up. "Trailing, and packing it fast. I brought nothing but my plough and a little seed, I got a coffee pot and skillet, and some beans and coffee. It put a wrinkle in my belly, but I'll fatten, come spring. Let me get my stakes in, and I'll winter somehow."

I swallowed my disappointment. I had hoped that either he could be induced to take our stock, or that I could trail with him. Yet I saw that his mind was made up, and that it would take more than the likes of me to change it.

We rumbled by the mission on the rocky flat under a bare, brown hill and on to our camp. Cherry was working over the fire, fixing supper. Father was down by the river, watching the life come again into his trees. Cherry glanced up, seeing Garnet before she saw me, and her gaze lingered. Garnet's eyes seemed to freeze in their sockets. He turned them finally to look at me. A new look was there.

"Gay, we'll get started on some rafts."

I grinned and was pleased, though it put me back on that cattle trail alone. Somehow, with Garnet in our camp, I forgot our old worry about winter nailing us someplace on the trail, and I knew he would be better with the raft than father. Garnet wasn't a talker, but he kept his lips busy, whistling an accompaniment to whatever his hands were doing. I caught Cherry listening to it, as if it pleased her. When I grinned at her she turned her head and got busy, but I knew that my sister didn't mind what I had brought into camp.

A man came to our camp from the Methodist mission that evening. "I think you'd ought to hurry yourself, Mr. Gilfillan," he told father. "We've had our usual pleasant autumn, but bad weather won't hold off much longer. In the winter it's very bad in the gorge, sir."

Father smiled. "We're in the Oregon country. Where winter catches us, there we'll plant our trees, sir."

It was Garnet who borrowed the falling axe and cross-cut from the mission the next morning. He had not expected to need such tools himself, and father hadn't thought of anything so practical. Coming back past our camp, he said, "Come alive, Gay. We're going to build some rafts." His eyes refilled themselves with my sister's slim figure as she tidied the camp after breakfast. He did not know Cherry as I knew her, or he would have detected the pretty flush climbing in her cheeks under the prairie tan. Then, as we sauntered off toward the pine stand above the river, he said, "You didn't tell me she was that old, boy."

I grinned. "Cherry's twenty."

"Marriageable," said Garnet thriftily. He sank the axe's glistening double bit deep into the bark of a tree. "A homesteader needs a wife." It did not seem to bother him that all his careful plans had been altered in the wink of an eye.

He was a rhythmic man with an axe, and the big chips flew. By evening we had our logs cut, two dozen of them, about a foot and a half through and forty long. Garnet hitched up his oxen and snaked the logs to the river. He was figuring to build two rafts, and I was still hoping father would let me handle one of the sweeps, but I knew I would have to drive the stock down the cattle trail. We spent the next two days lashing the rafts together, pointed in the bow, with big, crude sweeps in the stern.

Our last night at the *dalles* came, and

with it another man, riding westward on the Oregon Trail. We heard the drumming of horse's hoofs for a time, and then Eli McCabe whipped in on a big red gelding, not slowing until he pulled to a ball-footed stop by our campfire. Before anyone could ask him, he stepped down and smiled.

His eyes saw no one but Cherry, and if I had been impressed by the height of Garnet Rigdon, I was staggered now. McCabe wore buckskins, an immense man with fiery hair and beard. There was a rifle in the saddle boot and a Bowie knife in his belt, and I wondered why a man like that would need weapons other than his own hands. In spite of the shaggy beard and weather-roughened skin, his eyes were lively and young, and youth was in his powerful frame.

Cherry got up to get an extra plate, having early learned the laws of hospitality on the trail. Eli McCabe's gaze moved with her. He had announced his name and now he paused in rumination. He turned and off-saddled and pegged out his horse. He came back to the fire and looked at father.

"See you got your rafts built. I'll travel down with you."

"Man with a good saddler can ride through in less time." Garnet blew on the coffee he had just poured into his cup. "Could be we could get you to take our animals with you."

My heart leaped; maybe I still could get out of that job, which by now was a wholly unpleasant prospect.

McCabe shook his head and his glance touched Garnet briefly, as if scarcely seeing him. He accepted a filled plate from Cherry, his eyes growing warm and lively again. We had long been reduced to plain rations, yet Eli McCabe wolfed with noisy relish a mouthful of Dutch Oven bread soaked in brown bean broth.

"Good cook," he said, to the rest of us generally. "A man needs a wife in Oregon."

"Why?" asked Garnet, who a couple of days before I had heard make the same contention.

McCabe grinned at him. "Friend, if you have to ask, you're no competition."

I saw Cherry fling Garnet a look of surprise at the question, not understanding it had been an instinctive protest at the idea forming in McCabe's mind. But she gave Eli McCabe a glance of equal scorn and girlish contempt.

"From what I keep hearing, it seems the outfitting stations should supply women with the other equipment." For I had told her what Garnet had said. She had seemed a little pleased, then.

WE HEARD much of Eli McCabe that night, spun willingly in his rich, heavy voice. He had been a trapper in the Rockies for several years, though he undoubtedly was still less than thirty. He had been up the Missouri and down the Santa Fe trail; he had wintered with Indians and danced and fought at summer rendezvous. I felt myself tingling with envy of McCabe, who at less than my age had started doing all and no more than he wanted to do. He was wondrously equipped for it.

But a small thing was killing the beaver trade, McCabe told us. Eastern men had taken a fancy to silk hats and a vast and wonderful industry had to die. He told it in light good humor. Skins were getting scarcer anyhow, and new opportunities were opening on every hand. He had seen wagons filing countlessly through the Rockies and one day he had up and lit his own shuck.

A farm in Oregon was what he wanted now, a vast farm. He could run it, McCabe maintained, for he had been raised on one, had run away from one years ago. He asked father careful, intelligent questions about his fruit trees and that got father started. With words, Eli McCabe planted ten acres of new Gilfillans on his farm. He and father got ships to running to the California settlements and to Alaska and the Sandwich Islands. He was winning father completely, I saw, for the fine animal magnetism flowing from the man was backed by a sharp mind. Later I noticed that Garnet Rigdon did not whistle when he went out for a final look at the oxen.

We had an early breakfast the next morning and broke camp immediately afterward, and I had a tight sickness in me, for the animal-driving question was still unsettled. I was not even relieved when Garnet began whistling again as we loaded the rafts, father's trees filling one and

leaving room only for two or three passengers.

When the Missouri dirt had been shoveled from our wagon bed and sprinkled over the tree roots, Garnet got a pry.

"What's that for?" asked the McCabe.

"To take the wheels off the wagon."

McCabe laughed. He settled his hips under the tailgate and he raised the bed off the standard, swinging his end to rest on the right hind wheel. He did the same with the front end, and presently the bed was on the ground. He clamped his big hands onto the running gear and lifted both hind wheels.

"Now you can take them off, bucko."

I saw Cherry watching with a strange light in her eyes, and McCabe saw it and lifted the running gear higher. Garnet started whistling again, a quiet, monotonous tune. We got the wagon knocked down and lashed aboard the other raft, and we got Garnet's cart loaded, and all the loose stuff lashed on.

McCabe brushed his hands together and looked at Garnet. "Well, bucko, we won't be needing you, anymore. You can ride my red boy for the favor of taking him down."

I must have gaped. The McCabe was baldly trying to run Garnet out of the party. I looked at Garnet and he was motionless.

"I'm going to take our stock!" I blurted. "I can handle it all."

Garnet glanced at me and slowly grinned. He kept looking at me. He shook his head. Then he swung about and started off, heading toward the mission. McCabe's gaze settled on Cherry, and she turned away, a strange tightness in her face.

All father could see was the raft piled with his trees. "We might as well get going," he said.

It was Cherry who dallied. She looked at me crossly and said, "Gay, I bet you've gone and put our lunch hamper on the bottom of the load."

I knew that I hadn't, but I managed to look sheepish. I ran down to the lead raft and took my time about locating the hamper, which was on top where Cherry herself had put it. I saw her cast an anxious glance toward the mission. Then the tightness in me eased a little. Garnet was coming back.

Garnet's lanky body moved on an unbobbing line, yet I could see that he was fairly running. But he had slowed to an unhurried walk by the time he came up to the party. He grinned at me again.

"No sense putting a boy your size on a strange trail," he said mildly. "The mission'll send a couple of Indians down with the stock. They'll be at the cascades portage ahead of us. We'll need them there to pull the wagons past."

I could fairly shout with happiness when we swept out onto the river. I saw that the bounce had come back into Cherry, though she had gone aboard McCabe's raft, quite as if she hadn't noticed that Garnet had rejoined the party. Garnet took the sweep of our raft, with father and I seated a little ahead of him. To me it was a pair of clippers weighing anchor into the unknown. Presently Garnet's whistling started, low, intricate, building a pattern to represent all the no longer boyish things that were inside of him.

During the first day's running I could not understand what had given the gorge passage its unfavorable reputation. The river made a big horseshoe from the roaring *dalles* to the mountain portal, boring there into towering, nearly bare, brown mountains studded and striped with basalt. It was easy running for awhile, with the broad sweep of water meandering against the sheer uplifts, comfortably speeding the rafts.

We ran through noon, eating from a basket with cold hands, washing it down with river water. Garnet whistled and I dreamed, and father's eyes were on the gorge walls, even there, I suspected, planting his trees. In midafternoon we met a Hudson's Bay Company bateau, upbound from the post, the singing *voyageurs* motioning us greetings. We stayed well inshore, running without excitement, and when evening's sootiness began to show in the wintry overhead, the McCabe's raft, ahead of us, ran for the beach.

McCabe was joyous, all his cooped-up energies streaming out of him as we unloaded the camping gear. He had expertly picked a small cove, well-sheltered from the brisk wind that ran eternally in the gorge, with a sandy beach and ample driftwood for our fire. He swung and heaved and stomped the congealed motion out of him. He flung wood onto Cherry's fire un-

til she protested at its fierceness, then he lifted her boldly and set her aside and took over the cooking.

It was a capable meal he fixed us, though of the same monotonous fare. "A man needs a woman," said McCabe, and I knew it was to correct the bad impression he had made on Cherry with his earlier remark. "But only to appreciate the things he can do for her. That a real man can."

I began to feel sorry for Cherry, then. I knew that the man violated all the natural fastidiousness that was hers. Yet he was like a whirlpool in the river, pulling people to him against their will, blunt, brutal and irrepressible. I saw the color climb into Cherry's cheeks again. I saw Garnet smiling, thoughtfully smiling.

THE NEXT DAY we ran in rougher water, but again I was enchanted. The wind now was against the current, piling it into a heavy chop that washed over the raft, wetting our feet, chilling them. At breakfast that morning Cherry's and my glances touched and, as always, we understood each other in a flash. I took place on McCabe's raft. He looked at me questioningly but said nothing when he saw Cherry walking toward the other raft.

The McCabe's thoughtfulness soon vanished. Offshore and running smoothly, he motioned to me. "Take the helm, Gay." I knew that he recognized me as an obstacle, that he was working on me as he had worked on father. Yet my heart leaped, and I scrambled to get my hands on the sweep.

It was fine running our raft down the broad Columbia, which was the eye of a needle, the thread of the trail whipping half way across a continent. We drifted past scarps and spires, and the shores were beginning to change color, the tawny bareness giving way to heavier, undergrown timber above massive, castellated banks. We shot rapids and fought boils and whizzed past midchannel islands. We were always cold, but I didn't mind. The sweep tingled in my hands, and I looked at McCabe's giant back and shame filled me as I realized that thereafter he would likely have me in his grip, as he already had father.

McCabe's words planted fruit trees each night in our camp, and he augmented our fruit fleet with fast, newfangled steamers that, ice-cooled, could run around the Horn to the east coast. He went on to build a railroad for father, jumping it nimbly across the prairies and rivers and mountains to some new city in Oregon. We listened breathlessly, for he made it seem simple and sure. Cherry's eyes would take in McCabe and there would be something in them I had never seen before.

"We'll stake our claims side to side, Noah Gilfillan!" announced Eli McCabe. "It'll be nice for Cherry to visit her folks real often. Her and the kids." And McCabe's laughter boomed out over the river.

The light in Cherry's eyes changed again, and when the McCabe was done laughing, she said, "You must be tuckered, Eli McCabe, with planting orchards and building ships and having a family all in an evening."

I wasn't so sure that McCabe was dipping his brush in moon glow. There was intoxicating sense to what he was picturturing for our future, wonderful, exhilarating things, and Eli McCabe was a man of surprising competence. A shamelessly boastful person, he nonetheless had a way of laying proof on the line. We all had come to depend on him, to let him run things. We all felt safe with him along, and we were flying over the troublesome river passage in relative comfort and record time.

Even Garnet listened respectfully to McCabe's promises and advice. He showed a frank admiration of the McCabe's great strength. He took McCabe's orders without protest and carried them out. Eli McCabe unquestionably knew how to run a river, which seemed to be enough for Garnet. Garnet never even raised a hackle when McCabe pursued his blunt courting of my sister. Even I couldn't help wondering at such docility, and I saw that wondrous first smile Cherry had given him change now to a frequent thoughtful frown.

I decided finally that Garnet's serenity came from the fact that Cherry continued to ride on his raft. I began to suspect that McCabe had reached much the same conclusion. I saw the big man's eyes on Garnet in sharp speculation from time to time. Being McCabe, I knew that he would be doing something about that one little

flaw in his scheme of things. Yet when action came it was so shrewd that even I, expecting it, didn't recognize it at first.

We ran past a memaloose island where the Indians left their dead, and we passed the mouth of Dog River. We reached the ferry, half through the gorge, where the cattle trail swung from the south to the north shore because of better terrain. One of the earlier emigrants had remained to build a crude boat here, doing a humming business when the season was in full run. He told us that the Wascos had reached there with our stock three days before, and he had crossed them. They would be waiting for us at the cascades, a place where rapids again fractured the river for a five mile stretch. We would have to unload our rafts there, reassemble our wagons and use the animals to pull them over a bad hill. Then we would reverse the process and take to the river again.

"But the last stretch to Fort Vancouver ain't so bad," said the ferryman. "Once you've portaged, you're practically there."

We camped at the ferry that night, making a feast of it, for the ferry operator donated a cut of venison for Cherry's Dutch Oven. A high elation ran in McCabe, and because the man's spirits were always contagious, we all were animated and gay. We were nearly in the valley, where land was free and human sustenance came up naturally through the grass roots. Garnet's lips reveled gay little tunes once more.

It was McCabe who roused the camp the next morning and roused it with a roar.

"Garnet Rigdon, did you tie up the tree raft, last night?"

Garnet was already awake and pulling on his cowhide boots. "I sure did. Why?"

"It's broke away. It's gone."

Father was on his feet before the last words had left McCabe's lips. He shot a frantic glance at the river, then went galloping down the frozen bank in his stocking feet. I could see from the camp that there was only one raft there, McCabe's and my raft, tugging on the mooring lines. My heart swelled, and horror spilled through me. Garnet had always tended to the tree raft. He had tied it up the night before.

I couldn't decipher the look in Garnet's eyes. He climbed to his feet and stomped them into his boots. He said nothing. Father hobbled back to the camp, his face stricken, and he remained quiet. Below us the river ran wide, and we could see nothing on it that looked like a raft. Beyond sight were countless more miles of river and the wild rapids at the cascades.

ELI McCABE was not studying the river. He kept a sharp, speculative gaze on Garnet, and I could see something working violently in him. I, at least, sensed that he was spoiling for trouble, that he was crowding this.

"Damn a careless man!" roared the McCabe and he went after Garnet.

I think Garnet was expecting it, too. He watched the McCabe calmly. As McCabe sailed into him, Garnet stepped lightly aside, and I knew he wasn't afraid of the man. McCabe had hoped to get hold of him. A cracking fist made a strange sound in the cold air as it met McCabe's jaw.

A thrill shot through me, though I expected that Garnet had no chance of coming through this the victor. I was proud of him anyway. The McCabe heeled around, staring at Garnet now in new thoughtfulness.

Father lifted a hand, as though about to protest, then it fell limply away. I saw Cherry had crushed knuckles against her teeth and was staring wide-eyed. Yet she made no sound. Again Eli McCabe bounced in, and this time Garnet stood solid, meeting the rush, stopping it with a flurry of hard-driven fists. Somewhere my Iowa farmer lad had learned to handle those hands.

The McCabe dropped his brawling tactics and stood solidly, slugging it out. The whacking blows sent pain through me. I knew that each impact of the big man's fists was jarring Garnet to his innermost fibre. Garnet still looked cool, yet I detected distress mounting in his eyes.

Garnet gave ground then, dancing back, still watching McCabe, inviting another rush. But Eli McCabe was wary now. He had undertaken to prove himself top dog and was taking no chances on an upset. He jumped at Garnet again, and Garnet met it as he had before, whipping in his lightning-like fists. I realized the frustration that must be in Garnet's heart as he

realized he might as well be slamming against a granite rock.

The McCabe seemed able to absorb pain without greatly feeling it, for there was no hint of concern in his eyes. This time the McCabe whipped up a fury of surging fists. I held my breath, yet it seemed inevitable when Garnet straightened and dropped in dead weight.

The McCabe stepped back with elaborate indifference, turning away. Yet I could see the gleaming vanity in the man's eyes. I also saw his strategy now. We had met the cattle trail at this point, and Garnet had the choice now of taking the trail as had been his original plan. It was the McCabe's second attempt to drive Garnet out of camp, and it remained to be seen whether or not Garnet was to be driven.

The McCabe went bounding up the slope toward the ferryman's log hut. I went to Garnet, who had lifted onto his elbows. I saw that he was not really out, only dazed. He staggered up and walked uncertainly to the river. I followed him.

I was entirely breathless. "Garnet, did you wake up any, last night?"

Garnet shot me a guarded look, and I noticed that one eye was turning dark. Blood ran from a corner of his mouth, where both lips were puffing. "No. Did you?"

I shook my head. "No, and I'm sure father didn't because he sleeps like a log. And probably not Cherry. Garnet, McCabe turned that raft loose. He knew it would turn father against you, and it gave him an excuse to try and run you off."

Garnet grinned at last. "Gay, we don't know that, do we?"

"Well, I do." I was getting angry. "Garnet, you beat McCabe all the way. He tried to scare you, and you wouldn't scare. He tried to make you mad, and you won't get mad. He's bowled the rest of us over, but he's had no effect at all on you. You've got him buffaloed, so he's decided to fix you."

"We can't really say that, can we, Gay?"

I understood him, at last. "No, Garnet, we can't say it."

Eli McCabe came back with the ferry operator, and they were carrying oars. The ferryman put in the oarlocks, and they shoved the big boat over the shoal into the water. When he saw what they were up to, father raced down there, and I followed.

"Think you can pick it up, Eli?" father asked.

"Could be, Noah, but I can't promise. Damn a careless man, I say."

"Amen," said father, and he scrambled into the boat. I followed.

The boat was a crude, bateau-like affair that the man had made of green, whipsawed lumber, but it ran better than a yet clumsier raft.

With the oars we could go faster than the current, and I saw hope begin to build in father's eyes.

We overhauled the raft in an hour's running, bobbing along on the current without a single tree harmed. Father let out a little choked sound but said nothing. I saw a gleam in the McCabe's eye.

The ferryman said, "She must of busted loose just before you noticed. That was sure lucky."

"It was quick thinking, Eli," said father, "giving chase."

"You've got your trees back, Noah," said Eli McCabe. "Forget it.

We made the tree raft fast to the south shore, and father and I remained there while McCabe went back with the boat to bring on the other raft. I wanted to speak to father, to tell him what I thought, but I have never seen a man so shock-quiet. I couldn't speak, knowing how he felt about Eli, having no proof to back what I would say.

The other raft hulled up some four hours later, and I saw at a glance that there were only two people on it. Alarm shot through me. Had the McCabe decided to whip Garnet, to make a sure job of it? Had Cherry said something? Or had Garnet voluntarily withdrawn from the party, admitting guilt and shame and defeat? I couldn't believe that Garnet would let McCabe get away with it so easy, and my shock now was like my father's, though a little different in feeling.

The McCabe swung in to pick up our raft, elated again, his great steps springy, in love with the world once more. My eyes searched Cherry's face, but she avoided them.

"Where's Garnet?" I blurted, at last.

"Trailing," said Eli McCabe, and he offered no more.

Father didn't even look interested.

ALL THE WAY to the cascades portage I plotted hard against Eli McCabe, but I got nowhere. Garnet had nullified anything I could say by his own actions. Whether or not he was guilty of carelessness with the thing closest to father's heart, he had admitted defeat, which was as bad—or even worse. Even though I was handling a sweep, I was glum when the next afternoon we swung in at the upper end of the long portage.

There was a camp on the beach, and the smoke of a fire looked cheerful as we quartered in, though the temperature had moderated that day. I supposed that it was the Wascos, waiting there with our stock. We made our slow landing, and as McCabe and I tied up, I heard a small exclamation from Cherry. I looked toward the camp, and I almost let out a yell, for there stood Garnet.

Our six head of oxen and the McCabe's red gelding were picketed above the camp. Our Indians were gone, and I guessed that, anxious to be back across the mountains before bad weather, they had departed when Garnet arrived to take charge of the animals. Garnet welcomed us with a quiet greeting, and the total ease in him at once baffled and angered me.

The McCabe turned up the bank, and his big voice boomed, "What're you waiting for, bucko?"

"My cart," said Garnet mildly. His eyes were on Cherry, who stepped immediately to the fire, turning away from him.

There would be more work at this camp than at the others, for our rafts had to be unloaded completely, our wagon reassembled and loaded, and the whole drawn over a forbidding wagon trail that ran across a high hill and on for some five miles to the lower end of the portage. Thereafter the rafts had to be let down the long rapids at the end of ropes, to be reloaded again at the bottom of the chute. We pitched in.

There were a few Indians of the fish-eating tribes living at the portage, but they showed us little interest, though we had heard that they had a way of demanding tribute from gorge travelers. Perhaps McCabe's buckskins warned them that he was of the fur-trading gentry, a breed of men they had learned to respect.

It was late in the afternoon when we had everything unloaded. I helped Garnet get the wheels back on his cart, and his plough and seed wheat and few possessions loaded, and he spanned up his oxen. He meant to pull that same evening to the lower end. It gave me a chance to speak to him, and it rushed out of me.

"You let him run you off!"

Garnet had been whistling a low, wild tune, and a slow grin broke it off.

"It was McCabe or me, Gay. That's the way the man put it."

I gulped. "You're up to something, and I wish you'd tell me."

"You're a good lad, Gay." With a cluck to his oxen, Garnet started them up the steep-pitched trail.

The temperature stayed above freezing, that night, which was a welcome relief until, abruptly, black clouds ran across the moon and it began to rain. It was something that even the capable McCabe had not foreseen, and water began to drip through the big firs and we piled from our beds. McCabe and I got up the tarpaulins, but by then the entire campsite was soggy, and we spent a miserable night. Morning found us unrefreshed and irritable.

We broke camp immediately after breakfast and finished loading our wagon. There was a restlessness in McCabe when, about nine o'clock, he announced that we were ready to roll. He cracked the bullwhip above our double-spanned beasts, and they toed in, their massive shoulders bunching at the yokes. Our heavy wagon rolled through the mud that by now was a sloppy morass from the fresh-thawed earth. Father, Cherry and I followed behind, scrambling on the slippery, uncertain footing to keep up.

The trail began to climb, and a hundred yards thereafter the wagon stuck. Countless emigrant wagons had rutted the trail deeply, and in the peculiar sponginess of thawing earth it seemed to have no bottom. The wheels threw mud and sank hub deep, and at last the weight of the wagon was on the mud instead of the wheels. McCabe cracked his whip, and the oxen floundered. His whip touched the flank of the off-leader, and again they heaved themselves into their yokes, then a beast went down.

The McCabe lit into them, and I could see how it was with him. He refrained

from profanity for Cherry's sake, but he made it with his working lips and flashing eyes. I ploughed over to him, seeing everything in the man churning up. He had succeeded at last in running Garnet Rigdon out of the party, and Garnet had showed up again unruffled, compliant but undisturbed. The comfortable tenor of his camps had been ruined at last by the rain he had not foreseen. Now we were stuck on the trail. McCabe's lips tightened, and the bullwhip began to lift hair on our floundered brutes.

"Eli," I said, at length. "Why don't we just build a railroad?"

He heeled about and stared at me in the strangest way. Father gave me a brief frown and said, "You're a mite rough, Eli. They're doing their best. Maybe we'd ought to remove part of the load."

"I'll get it up there, Noah." McCabe cracked his whip again.

I heard a small sound from Cherry and glanced up the trail. Garnet broke over the hill, driving his own span.

Everything the McCabe had went then into an effort to get the rig moving. He cracked his whip and yelled, and even placed his great shoulder against the wagon and shoved, but it was not enough. Garnet came on down, unhurried, and I could see by the shape of his lips that he was whistling.

When he pulled up, he said, "I figured you'd have trouble after that rain, Eli. I'll hook on."

The mild courtesy took the wind out of McCabe. I helped Garnet hook ahead of our two spans. Garnet came around to McCabe. "My girls don't work so good for strangers, Eli. I'll take the whip."

I knew that this was only to get the torturous thing away from McCabe and that Garnet would not use it. He didn't. Pretending to look at the yokes, he fiddled at the heads of our beasts for a moment, whistling a little, joshing them. At length he moved up by his nigh animal and spoke. The brutes toed down and ours responded and the wagon moved. It bogged again and again going up that hill, but it reached the top. I knew full well that the extra span was only partly responsible.

It took all that day to get through to the west end of the portage and a camp made there and our two rafts let down through the long rapids. It rained no more, but with evening fog pressed into the gorge. It was a new thing to us, depressing, a damp and heavy veil isolating us from everything we knew except each other. And we weren't exactly welcome to each other, that night. Garnet remained in the camp, unobtrusive but without apology. The McCabe was considerably toned down. Father's thoughts were turned inward. Cherry, our cook and the natural center of our attention, kept busy and silent.

The fog had not lifted by morning, yet the McCabe, motion generating in him again, began to break camp. Finally father asked, "You think it's safe for us to go out in that, Eli?"

McCabe stared at him. "Why not? All we do is follow the water, and it don't need eyes."

At last Garnet spoke up. "Eli, the ferryman said this stretch is worse for islands than the other. It makes the inshore water faster. Maybe we ought to wait till we can see where we're going."

"And how long will that be, maybe?" demanded McCabe. "Anyhow, I had the idea you were trailing, Garnet Rigdon."

My father was a fair minded man, no matter what else. He had not been present when McCabe eliminated Garnet at the ferry, though he had not questioned the move afterward. Now he said, "Garnet built these rafts for us, Eli." The McCabe looked wonderingly at father, then shrugged.

It took several hours to get knocked down again and loaded, and by the time we stood away from the landing the fog had thinned considerably, dissolving our alarm. The McCabe's simmering truculence seemed to go before the animal pleasure in sheer action, and he turned good-humored again.

But he made one more taunting gesture when he beckoned Cherry to his raft, as we took place, and I did not like my sister at all when she acquiesced.

Father was not letting his fruit trees out of his sight again, and he and I and Garnet took the hind raft. The McCabe spun out into the current and we were away, running on the river through a milky but now beautiful atmosphere. My spirits lifted a little. We were some forty miles from Fort Vancouver, which would

be a measure of civilization again. The end was in sight.

We passed a couple of small islands but after that the channel was clear for a long while except for a far-stretching slough on the north side. Then, in late afternoon, the fog began to thicken again, and later a cold drizzle came through it, but McCabe ran on. Still later we lost sight of them, our sweep of visible river becoming smaller and smaller. I could see the worry building in father's eyes, but none of us spoke. The McCabe was a first-rate river man, and he would surely beach soon.

We realized presently that we would have no way of knowing when he did, for we could not pick them up again. When visibility dropped to a few hundred feet, Garnet, without speaking, quartered for the north shore. We nosed presently onto a gravel shoal and I leaped ashore with the line.

"Cherry's got our grub," Garnet said. "Looks like we'll make a hungry camp."

"You mean we camp?"

"No sense in going on, Gay. Maybe they've already beached." He gave me a thoughtful look. "I wouldn't worry. McCabe's a good water man. He probably beached ahead of us."

"That's right," father said, and I could see him easing. "We might see their fire presently."

"I wouldn't count too much on that, Mr. Gilfillan. This stuff's thicker than plain night."

A SLOWLY MOUNTING tension silenced us as night came on. I kept building our fire higher and higher, knowing that it could not be seen very far. When white and black were equally mixed about us, I could not stand it longer, and I said the thing I knew Garnet could not say.

"Garnet, if they'd beached ahead of us, they would probably have called to let us know. I'm going to hike down a ways."

Garnet sprang to his feet. "Pretty wild country, Gay. Maybe I getter go along."

It seemed that we stumbled through blinded hours. The uplifts stepped back less abruptly on this shore, yet the country was strange to us. Our search seemed hopeless yet, at last, Garnet halted and grew wholly motionless ahead of me. I caught up, and relief left me limp. There was the palest glow of a fire somewhere ahead of us.

Garnet spoke at last. "Gay, we can't do it."

It was an enigmatic statement, yet it's import hit me, coming mostly, perhaps, from the tight regret in Garnet's voice. Father's anxiety had been for their safety, yet Garnet and I were young and knew about young things.

I was remembering the terrible impact of the McCabe's splendid endowment, which had melted father, and even me at first. I remembered the strange, reluctant response in Cherry. I was old beyond my years momentarily, knowing that a woman's feelings and her will were separate things, often inimical things. I had never doubted Cherry, nor did I now. They were safe from the river, and the rest was Cherry's to say. This was what Garnet meant, and I knew that he was right.

He turned to me. "Gay, hustle back and bring your father and the other raft."

I thought he had changed his mind, and I fairly ran over the rough land, finding my way somehow. I told father that we had sighted their camp and were going down, and we were soon on the river again. I bumped and grounded and probed my way down that blind river shore, my eyes straining for the light of a fire. I saw it at last.

Our raft secured, father and I scabbled up the bank, wonder in me because there was no other raft tied at the shoreline. Garnet stood by the fire alone. He gave me a calm smile.

"Where're Cherry and Eli?" asked father in surprise.

"Farther down," said Garnet. "I thought this was far enough for Gay to run in the dark. The water sounds fast below here."

"I'd like my supper." Father's voice was impatient and a little cross. "We'll leave the raft and hike down."

"I thought you wouldn't want us to leave the trees," Garnet said.

"Well, no."

I was beginning to understand it. Garnet had built a big fire here. He had moved upstream somewhat from where we had stood when we discovered their camp, which was lost now in the fog. Yet our fire was large enough I expected they could

see it from down there. My estimate of Garnet Rigdon went up a dozen pegs then.

"Couldn't Gay make his way down there," asked father uncertainly.

"Why, unless you're real hungry, Mr. Gilfillan, it's pretty rough going in the dark."

I saw father's eyes speculate on Garnet's lanky figure, and I knew he was detecting the wilful stubbornness. It made father wary and thoughtful for a time, and he said nothing more. We sat by the fire, and I grew old, for they did not come from the other camp. Sometimes I thought I detected the merest glow of red in the befogged night.

I saw restlessness coming up in father. He would climb to his feet and take a turn around the fire, and I would catch him staring down the river. He would throw it off and sit down again. He knew what Garnet was up to, at last, and he wasn't yet ready to admit his growing lack of confidence in the lustrous McCabe. He was patently annoyed with Garnet for putting him so skilfully to the test.

Finally father snapped, "Stop that plagued whistling, Garnet Rigdon!"

Garnet grinned apologetically and fell quiet. Outwardly he seemed wholly relaxed. His long legs were stretched lazily ahead of him, yet one foot kept rocking on its heel. I knew that at any moment father was going to adopt the weak excuse of hunger and send me down there.

Then we were all listening to the sound of movement in the night, and excitement leaped in father's eyes.

Cherry's voice said, "Hello, there. Aren't you hungry?"

Cherry stepped into the firelight, and Garnet grinned at her easily. Father's relief was stamped all over him, but he did not seem to care.

"Where's McCabe?" he asked.

Cherry gave him a calm look. "Down there. He's a little annoyed, I'm afraid. He says you deserve to spend a wretched night for being scared to follow him." I sensed that she was not telling all that had gone into McCabe's temper.

There was a strange look in father's eyes. I knew he was realizing that, though Cherry was too inexperienced to think of it, the McCabe should have built their fire higher on sighting ours, signalling us to raft on down. This left no doubt that McCabe had held a cozier arrangement in his mind. And from the breathlessness she now tried to conceal, I knew that Cherry had lit out running when she saw our fire. My tall Iowa farmer had forced the decision on them so quietly they were not certain of it yet.

"Well, let's go eat," said Garnet, apparently concerned only about his stomach.

I saw anger flash in Cherry's eyes at his apparent lack of worry. And as so often happens, my own relief was wearing off to expose an edge of temper. While Garnet and I got our raft untied, I had a chance to speak to him aside.

"McCabe saw our fire and didn't tell Cherry. What if she hadn't happened to notice it?"

"I figured she'd be watching both directions, Gay."

"But what if she hadn't wanted to come?"

"I knew she'd come, lad."

I wished that Cherry could hear that, but she had been helping father down the dark bank. We dropped down to the other camp and, when we did finally, I ate my supper with special relish. The McCabe had turned silent and sullen, and I realized that he knew he had cooked his goose.

The fog pinned us to the shore the next day, then lifted. Two days easy running put us to Fort Vancouver, and Garnet's whistle was a wild and merry thing. Cherry quietly changed places with me, rafting with father and Garnet. The McCabe knew I was his implacable enemy, and our two days together on the other raft were silent.

The Hudson's Bay Company fort was a thrilling sight as we made our slow drift toward it. It was a virtual city in the wilderness, we were to learn, staffed by adventurous Scots, French-Canadian trappers and *voyageurs*, with Indian wives and numerous half-breed children. It stood a short distance back from the north shore, under the British flag that so rapidly was losing its influence in this land filling with American settlers.

WHEN WE touched shore for the last time, Garnet disappeared immediately in the direction of the fort. When he did not reappear. I saw Cherry's gaze go anxiously that way, time after time. Then

at last he returned, walking leisurely. The McCabe had been busying himself making camp, and now Garnet strode up to him.

His voice was bland when he said, "Eli, we're obliged for your help. We'd likely have drowned ourselves without you. Or been caught in a heller of a storm. I have to thank you before we say good-by."

McCabe wheeled about, straightening, the old liveliness again in his eyes, and a look of surprise and relief.

"Leaving us, Rigdon?"

"No, Eli. You are."

I saw a corner of Cherry's mouth hike, and it put the sweetest look on her face I had even seen. Father straightened, his mouth dropping open. I swallowed, and it made a loud sound. Garnet was having his turn now. He was set to run McCabe out of the party, and I knew that whatever else the McCabe would not run. I knew that McCabe would tear Garnet apart again. We all knew that Garnet realized it.

I saw at last why Garnet had held himself in, all the way through the river gorge. McCabe was beyond doubt a first-rate river man. With winter on our backs and a wild, unknown gorge ahead, we had needed him badly. So easy had been our passage, we had forgotten the grim thing it could have been, so often was to other travelers. Yet the need had been the Gilfillan's, for Garnet Rigdon had not been obliged to raft.

McCabe pondered Garnet's words, the balances in him moving slowly. He had been fighting a man who baffled him, all the long river miles. Somehow he had thrown himself, like a steer busting at the end of a rope. But he still had his enormous body to work for him. I saw it coming up in the man. McCabe did not mean to run, no matter how he stood with Cherry and father.

I wanted to shout to McCabe that I knew he had turned the tree raft loose. Yet I knew this was Garnet's moment.

The McCabe's voice sang out. "Would you listen to the man!"

My father smiled gravely, then. "Eli, I have to thank you, too. When I'm ready for railroads and ships, I'll get in touch with you. Meanwhile, I need a man who can get some ploughing done. Goodbye, Eli." Without offering his hand, father walked away. I saw he had got it all put together, finally.

The McCabe resorted then to the only thing in which he had bested Garnet. His nostrils flared, a gleam came into his eyes, and I saw the great frame tensing.

To my surprise, it was Garnet Rigdon who made the first move. Without warning, he bent his head slightly on his shoulders and sailed in.

There was a look of tremendous relief in Cherry's eyes, though how she figured it could end any differently than it had before I did not know. Yet after that first flurry, I began to share her optimism. Garnet seemed to have taken the McCabe's measure in that first fight. He had pondered on it afterward and learned from it.

Now he seized and held the initiative, and it was like a blooded stallion battling a huge Percheron.

I could not forget that the McCabe was a veritable block of granite. He could win on sheer endurance, if nothing else. It would take a sledgehammer to drop him. Garnet seemed fully aware of this hazardous stamina. He was doing his utmost to get in his punch at the earliest moment. He used a trick of feinting that I saw kept fooling the McCabe, leaving an opening for the big man to rush into and simply not being there when the punch came.

Dust rose. People streamed from the fort to watch. It was one time when I was sure that the McCabe did not relish an audience. Then, as much as I admired and liked Garnet Rigdon, I was amazed at what happened. Once more Garnet left that open place. The McCabe lunged for it. Again, as he always did, dropping his shoulders and lowering his head and charging like a bull.

Garnet stepped lightly aside, and I saw his teeth clench as he put everything he had into a short, chopping blow driven at a right angle to McCabe's jaw. I saw the big man jerk, and he kept rushing, out of control, eyes glazed. Then he stumbled to his knees and went down. He did not get up.

I saw Cherry running to Garnet then. I knew it was their moment. I glanced in the direction my father had taken. I went that way, eager to be glad with him that we had us a man who could plough a furrow.

TRAITOR OR HERO?

By HOWARD JENISON

Here is a thrilling, true account of the Rogue River Tribe's last great battle, and of a young brave whose loyalty was to a white man.

WHEN the news of the discovery of gold in California reached St. Louis, Missouri, my grandfather and partner were engaged in the business of outfitting emigrants with canvas-covered wagons, stout oxen, strong horses, groceries and other essential supplies. They decided that my grandfather should go out to California and look the situation over. Accordingly, he took his wife and children back to New Hampshire where her folks lived, and where ancestors of both had lived for something like a hundred and fifty years. Then he crossed the plains to California, buying his passage with a train as people today buy passage on seagoing vessels, with meals furnished.

The proprietor of the train was evidently not a good provider or else he was not a good manager. Maybe he was just plain stingy. Anyhow, he had greatly underestimated the appetites of his passengers. In consequences, the provisions gave out and the passengers nearly starved. Once my grandfather shot an owl. They boiled and boiled and boiled it but were still unable to stick a fork into it, but ate it anyhow. Thereafter, he was wont to refer to steaks or other cuts of meat whose consistency left something to be desired as being "as tough as a biled owl" sometimes to my grandmother's indignation.

To add to the emigrants' sufferings, cholera broke out and many of them died and were buried by the way, usually at night. Oxen were driven across the graves and fires were built above them as protection for their remains against Indians and predatory animals. The latter are wary of a spot which retains the scent of fire.

In California, Grandfather explored the situation and decided that the greatest opportunities for the average man on the Pacific Coast lay not in mining gold but in the possession of many acres of the good earth. Accordingly he returned to the East by Panama, "swearing by all that was high and holy" that he would never travel with a wagon train again. He and his partner wound up their business affairs in St. Louis and prepared for the long and dangerous trip across the plains.

Grandfather tried to induce my grandmother to go by water but she was deathly afraid of the water and the arduous trip across the Isthmus, although some of her forbears had been seafaring people. So my grandfather had a heavy carriage built with exceedingly strong springs and in this, she and my mother, then a little girl seven years old, rode across the plains. At first the carriage was drawn by a team of strong horses but as the roads grew worse and the horses weary and footsore, oxen were substituted. My grandmother drove the horses part of the way but I think my grandfather drove the oxen.

Grandpa had said he would never cross those plains again with an emigrant train and he didn't. He and his partner fitted out four other canvas-covered wagons. One was driven by my grandfather most of the time, one by his partner, and the other two by men who "worked their passage" across the plains in this way and by driving the stock. These five wagons traveled somewhat ahead of one train and behind another, had no trouble with Indians, ate well and were as comfortable as could be under such circumstances. It was really a foolhardy thing to do and few people expected them to get through safely. But all pioneers took great chances. It must have been very hard on my grandmother who had been what was called "gently raised" and knew nothing of hardship and privation. Incidentally, one of the men who worked his passage across, eventually became very wealthy.

I think it was the train just ahead that was massacred in Fandango Valley some twenty miles or so southwest of where Ft. Bidwell was later located. It has been many years since I heard these stories told by my grandparents and my mother and if I am wrong I shall be glad to be corrected for the sake of posterity. (I have

several great-grandchildren who enjoy hearing tales of pioneer days.) A few of the men escaped the massacre and hurried back to warn the other trains. My grandfather corralled his little five-wagon train and waited for the next train to catch up with them.

I remember my grandparents' description of the scene of the massacre which my mother recalled vividly. It was a dreadful sight for the eyes of a little seven-year-old girl but nothing comparable with sights seen by the young victims of modern European savages during the war recently ended.

The weary emigrants had stopped to rest and refresh themselves and their stock in a lovely little valley with velvety green meadows and sparkling streams, surrounded by lofty mountains snow-capped the year round. The women intended doing the laundry that had been neglected so long while they were traversing the hot, dreary, dusty deserts of Utah and Nevada. It is monotonous and wearisome enough today, crossing those deserts by train or auto, but imagine what it must have been in clumsy, jolting wagons drawn by tired, slow-moving ox teams!

The young people decided to have a dance, a "fandango", as our Spanish friends term it. And while they were dancing on the velvety sward, to the rollicking tunes of fiddle and guitar and banjo, the Indians attacked—yelling, screaming, painted savages! The peaceful, lovely scene became something that outrivals Dante's Inferno. All of the emigrants were massacred, except two or three men who escaped to warn the following trains, and, it was said, a few women and young children, destined for salves. As far as I know, none of these were ever rescued.

MY GRANDFATHER'S small train and the following one camped a few days in Fandango Valley waiting for another train. Needless to say, they kept a strong guard posted to prevent surprise which would have saved the first train. They buried the dead and mutilated bodies, victims of the Indians' vengeance. But while our sympathies are with the whites, let us not forget that they were the invaders of the Red Man's country; that the Indians were patriots repelling the enemy, just as much as we should have been had the Japs or the Nazis tried to invade our own country during this last war. They fought the white invader as they had fought other Indian tribes for ages past and treated him with no greater degree of cruelty than if he had been another Indian.

Because there was less danger from Indian attacks in the dark, they drove down Goose Lake Valley at night. I have often listened with prickling scalp while my mother described that terrifying journey. They must have made a lot of noise, those creaking clumsy wagons, the bellowing oxen and cattle and the neighing horses and barking dogs; yet they were not attacked.

Down Goose Lake Valley they went, past the great lake some fifty miles or more in length, where even I in my young days saw great clouds of geese and ducks that actually darkened the light of the sun; past the present location of Alturas in Modoc Co. long known as "Dorris Bridge", past the present site of Canby, named for General Canby, killed by the Modocs much later on, through either Pit River Canyon and the present site of Adin, west through Big Valley—the old emigrant trail passed near the first school I taught—or perhaps by way of Black's Canyon and heavy timber with no water within two day's travel, and so towards Dry Lake. They made the best time possible with their jaded animals because of fear of the Indians and necessity for haste in order to get settled before winter rains and storms set it.

After Dry Lake there was Bloody Point on the shore of Tule Lake, now reclaimed, revealing the rock carvings whose origin is unknown to the Indians themselves, so ancient they have not even a tradition regarding them; Bloody Point where an emigrant train was in deadly danger of ambuscade unless the train master and scouts used the greatest vigilance, where there was little more than room for the wagons to pass between the lake and the lichen-covered cliffs, and where at least one emigrant train was massacred.

Beginning at the southern shore of the lake are the fastnesses of the Lava Beds where a handful of Modoc Indians held off at least a hundred times their number of soldiers and civilians for many months and were at last defeated only by lack of am-

munition and food. Instead of being accorded the honors of war for their brave stand against such terrific odds, these Indian patriots did not have their poor arms handed back to them as did Lee at Appotomattox, but the leaders were ignominiously hanged by the neck until they were dead.

And so our emigrants jogged on into the Klamath Basin and across the Siskiyous. At last they reached the Rogue River which was their destination. Both my grandfather and partner took up homesteads a few miles out of where Medford now is, at foot of Table Mt.

I beileve each was also entitled to what was known as a "pre-emption claim" of some additional 160 acres. Also, the wife of every married man was entitled to another 160 acres which was called a "donation claim", the object having been to encourage married settlers. Anyhow, they certainly owned "quite a passel" of the most fertile land in the Rouge River Valley. Grandfather sent back to his old home in New Hampshire for trees for an orchard.

He sold the site of old Ft. Lane to the government and was never fully paid for it. There is a plaque near the highway placed there by the D.A.R. marking the site of the fort. I saw it when I was there a few years ago. There appears to be absolutely nothing left of the fort itself. I noticed a few gnarled and stunted pear and apple trees which looked as if they might have sprung up from the stumps of trees that had been cut down long ago. They must have been very, very old.

I think there was an outbreak of the Rogues soon after my grandfather reached the valley but I can't recall hearing them speak much about it. By 1856 the folks were sitting pretty. They had several hundred tons of hay in the stack to be sold to the government for the cavalry horses at the fort, on their own property. The orchard was growing nicely. They had a large, comfortable house.

JACKSONVILLE, a few miles away, was a thriving young gold camp. The Sterling mine, farther on, was to become a fabulous producer of gold dust and nuggets, from Daisy Creek and Jackson Creek. Incidentally, miners are still "gophering" in that little burg. One could hardly pan a shovelful of gravel any place in town today without getting a "color."

And then the blow fell! The Rogue River Indians went on the warpath. A Rogue mahala (squaw) occasionally washed and did other work for my grandmother who always treated her kindly and paid her well for her services. The squaw had several children who, according to custom, always accompanied her. The eldest, a boy of perhaps ten years when my grandparents settled there, was very intelligent. He often came alone to do small chores like drawing water, bringing in wood, hunting eggs with my mother, and watering stock. Probably he had an Indian name but my folks called him Billy. He was a slim little lad, with large, black, wistful eyes. My folks became very much attached to him and he reciprocated their affection.

One night when everyone was in bed, someone tapped lightly on the livingroom door. The knock was repeated with great urgency. Grandfather got out of bed.

"Who is it?" he asked as usual before unbarring the door.

"Billy! Quick! Open door!"

Grandfather opened the door a few inches and Billy slid through. Indians always opened doors just far enough to allow themselves to slip in sidewise.

"Bad Injun come! Kill you! Kill you mahala! Kill Emma! Kill evvybody! You go fort! *Quick!*"

"Stay and go with us, Billy!" Grandmother said. "If your people learn you have warned us they will kill you."

"No, me go now. Injun no see'em me. Goodabye."

He slid through the door and the darkness swallowed him up.

My grandfather and partner hastily harnessed the horses while grandmother threw a few necessities into some carpetbags. They drove to the fort as fast as they dared. The next morning a detachment of soldiers accompanied them to Jacksonville. All the women and children were placed in a large brick building that had just been erected, one of the first two in town, I believe.

A wounded officer of the militia gave up the small log cabin he occupied just back of the "fort" in order that she might have

the necessary privacy, and there, three days later, my aunt Mary Long was born. There were several of those cabins occupied by single men and later on by Chinese miners. When I was back a number of years ago the cabins were gone and only the outlines of their foundations were faintly discernible. The "fort" is now a Pioneer Museum.

The Indians arrived shortly after my grandparents reached the fort. The precious hay went up in smoke. They carried out all the groceries they could take with them, destroyed the rest pouring flour on the ground, then burned the house and did their best to hack down the young orchard. They carried off all the family clothing. My grandmother had several silk dresses and "mantles" and these the squaws appropriated. A year or so after the war had ended, grandfather's partner came across an old squaw wearing a silk dress that he recognized as having belonged to my grandmother. It was dirty and stiff with grease but he was so enraged that he tore the dress from her. But grandmother used to laugh and say "To the victors belong the spoils" or words to that effect. She was kind to Indians to the day of her death and always said that those who fought the whites most fiercely were the greatest patriots and most worthy of respect.

Many of the settlers were killed in that last Rogue outbreak, many homes destroyed and possessions looted, stock driven off and killed. When my grandfather ventured to return to the ruins of his home, he found the body of little Billy lying face down near the cabin. He had been shot in the back. His people had considered him a traitor. Was he traitor or hero? "It makes some difference whose ox is gored," is the way those frontier folk would put it.

At least there was one white family who always revered his memory, who always thought of him with affection and gratitude.

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ON SALE NOW

Another shot rang over the heads of the crouching congregation and they saw it fan the hair on the preacher's head.

SIX-GUN SERMON

By W. EDMUNDS CLAUSSEN

Clee Larson was a great sky pilot—the best Picture Rock ever had. But it was a strange and wild sermon he preached that Sunday Sheriff Morgan waited outside the church door!

THERE WAS A NEW PARSON in the little slab-board church in Picture Rock Basin. He was a tall fellow, lean as any critter ever wintered through the hard Montana blizzards. He just stood up one Sunday in the absence of the circuit riding preacher and walked to the front of the church. From the inside his vest he drew a dog-eared Bible. He looked like a parson in his long frock coat, and the hollow ashes of his eyes strengthened the sepulchral austerity of his gaunt face. His voice had a cracking sound, like the shrill northern wind bending high branches through the canyon.

His doctrines were an odd amalgamate of all religions, plus a good bit that must have come from the Indian medicine men. But

they listened fine and the old timers said they'd hold up good as solid stuff. So Clee Larson was kept on as regular preacher.

Some said he had come to the gold coast on a cholera ship by way of Panama. Some whispered he'd been seen atop a table in the *Bella Union* condemning all vice in San Francisco into a blue hell. Others, just looking into his eyes, said he was a man who had suffered a lot. Anyway, most everyone thought he'd do all right as preacher.

PALM SUNDAY. The little church was crowded. Clee Larson had seen the three men come in late and seat themselves in a back row close to the door. A tremor passed through Clee's bony body, but not a shadow crossed his bland, angular face. One of the strangers was a bush-bearded miner. The second was smooth shaven, and his eyes were unhealthy-looking. The third was red-faced, burnt by wind and exposure in open places, and across his high cheek bone a jagged scar zigzagged to the corner of his thin mouth. Parson Clee Larson went right on with his christening.

There was a good deal of the Baptist about the way he christened the Hornblower twins. Ada was first, and he dipped her tiny, muslin-swathed body into a goldpan filled with sun-warmed water and then he handed the screaming baby to her mother who had a great towel waiting. Little, cherubic-faced Robert was next. He took him by the ankles and dipped him, shoulders first, into the brine. Then the door opened and five more men crowded into the rear of the church. They stood silently, broad hats in hand, until Clee had emptied his goldpan out the window and stood it to dry beside the altar. Then the boldest of the five cleared his throat and spoke. There was a shiny, tin shield with five points pinned on his cowhide vest.

"'Scuse us, Reverend. There's been a killin' up at the Picture Rock diggin's and we followed our men down. There's three tired nags standin' by your hitch rail. We reckoned the killers came in here for safety. Can you tell us anything about them horses?"

Clee's congregation had never seen such a light dawn across the features of their parson. The association of ideas was bending the parson's mind into old back trails of the past. He gripped the altar tighter with his thin white hands. When he spoke his eyes were straight on the man who wore the badge.

"I'd let you know if I thought any members of my flock had not accepted God, Sheriff Morgan. Some ride to worship a great many miles on their horses."

"Sorry to bother you," Morgan said. "We just didn't want no trouble here." He and his posse shuffled out into the light.

For a long time there was silence. They could hear the possemen mounting, and then five horses padded softly away from the church. Sheriff Morgan was sending his men toward the mountains that rimmed the little town. Breath came easier inside the tiny church.

Clee Larson turned his head on its thin pivot and looked into the waiting faces. "The sermon today will be 'Ye Must Be Reborn Again'," he said quietly.

He started in, a soft, low cadence to his carefully chosen words. He was tracing an example for his roughly garbed flock. He told them about a man he once had known intimately. "We'll call him Clee Larson," the preacher's voice droned, "and we'll suppose for a time that this man is me."

He painted for them a picture of a young student of the ministry who had fallen before the gold fever that swept over the land. He told of the long lines of passengers waiting for the departure of ships in New York harbor; impatient to be on their way toward the gold fields. Of the suffering of Clee Larson when he reached Chagres, the rottenest and most ungodly spot in all Christiandom, where all men stole and cheated and the native women wore hardly any clothes at all. He told how men drank rum in the jungles and went mad, or waited around for ships that never came until their insides rotted from the filth of the country.

And then he jumped to the Sierras. Men who had been Clee's friends in the jungles were now his partners at the mines. How they searched for the bright, gleaming metal, and how the hopes burnt high in their breasts. Then Clee found a pocket; the richest, purest stuff on the hillside.

That night a Digger Indian girl was brutally offended. In the morning the chief came to their camp and brought the girl's father and her brothers and the girl her-

self. She pointed out Larson to them and held out his watch and chain for proof. Larson shook his head and denied all guilt or knowledge of the affair, but his partners acted as though they believed th echief's story, and they put Larson from their camp and jumped his claim. That night while Clee was rolled in his blankets the redskins struck. He climbed to his knees and fought back with his knife in self-defense. By sheer numbers they overpowered him and took him to their camp where they offered him the choice of accepting this girl as bride or suffer whatever punishment their chiefs would provide.

While he talked the parson stripped off his coat and vest. Wide-eyed, his congregation looked upon the pattern of welts criss-crossing their parson's chest. He failed to show them his back, but held his eyes, intead, close by the door.

"They let me go after seven years," Clee shouted. A violence was building behind his bland brows. The carnage of the past was running back through his fevered brain. "In seven years she found for herself a new mate and took him in marriage after their Indian fashion. But seven years have not been enough to cover the marks made by the knife of Clee Larson the night the redmen took him! They had a white leader that night and I stand here before him and demand one thing: Has he atoned for the sins of his past? Has he taken the Lord unto himself?"

The three men in the last row had risen as the parson's voice keyed higher. They backed for the door with drawn guns, wicked looks playing across their tight faces.

"Don't leave, my friends, for the sheriff is still outside the door," Larson's sharp words stung them. "Your only safety lies here, inside the House of the Lord."

An ugly, guttural noise came from the throat of the man with the scarred face. He lurched his body forward and the long gun in his hand filled the church with an ear-splitting crash. The parson stood solidly behind his pulpit. From somewhere behind it he had filled his hand with a frontier Colt. Another shot sang over the heads of the crouching congregation and they saw it fan the scant hair on their preacher's head. Then the gun in his hand spoke in answer to the scar-faced man; spoke with the only language this killer could understand. They turned and saw him sag limply and fall to the floor. Sheriff Morgan lurched through the door and hurtled over the body. His bared peacemaker shoved itself menacingly toward the remaining killers.

These two failed to be perturbed by the sheriff's actions. Their eyes were still held by the magic hole in the end of the sky pilot's pistol, and they submitted while the lawman slipped his cuffs over their hands.

Morgan turned forward to offer his thanks to the parson. He saw the preacher had laid aside his pistol and was covering his chest with his frock coat. The dead past with its haunting memories was gone forever. Gone was the cadaverous look from his wolf-lean face. The smoke of powder was the incense Preacher Larson had burnt this Palm Sunday; behind its drifting veils a fresh light was burning in the Reverend's eyes. Morgan found himself looking into a stranger's face. He understood now why his two prisoners cowered. Larson's spirit had miraculously rekindled in the crash of pistol fire.

He was free now of the weight of seven years of unjust punishment.

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES A Fiction House Magazine FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

WHITE SQUAW OF THE CHEYENNES

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

THE SIOUX LOOKOUT might have been a statue sculped from the brown lava which formed his background on the crest of the volcanic chimney, so stockstill was the posture of his vigil. Within the hour a ribby old timber wolf had padded stealthily along a ledge to windward, a pebble's toss away, without catching the brave's scent.

Naked save for a breech clout sagging under the bulk of scalping knife and iron tomahawk, the warrior had a single jutting eagle quill aslant on his brushy scalplock, its umber-stained tip branding him as a minor chief of the Brulé tribe.

A Jennings musket, its metal stained with grassroot juice to prevent the Wyoming sun from glinting a betraying flash to hostile eyes, was cradled across the Sioux's knees.

Hawk's Perch, the red men called this towering landmark overlooking the Great Medicine Trail which the palefaces used on their treks to Oregon. From its dizzy apex, the Brulé's eyes, like chipped obsidian under lithic brows, commanded a vast reach of frontier wilderness, stretching off and away in hazy purple heat-waves from the foothill spurs of the Laramie range.

Since dawn, the savage had watched the westering progress of the covered wagon train approaching from the Platte country. Like a tenuous line of crawling gray grubworms, the prairie schooners had inched abreast of Hawk's Perch here at high noon.

Squinting against the sun's brassy glare, the brave counted the wagons with telescopic accuracy. Forty-six of them, drawn by mules and oxen mostly. Led by a red-wheeled Shuttler, but in the main they were high-boxed Conestogas with a smattering of light-geared Dearborn carriages.

Outriders on horseback bracketed the train, resembling bugs crawling along the grassy floor of the valley. A buckskin-clad trail scout had led the way that morning, a mile in advance of the train. The scout had vanished in a fold of the Laramie hogbacks up ahead, unaware of the Indian war party hiding in the brushy gulch of Deerhorn Creek, which forced a detour toward the hills.

Chief Buffalo Wolf could have dropped the scout with an arrow at close range. But he had stayed his warriors' bowstrings, in favor of the richer prize, the wagon caravan which was creaking toward the break in the dry wash directly below Hawk's Perch.

The sentinel's vigil was at an end. Rising to his feet with a supple grace which betrayed no trace of stiffness from the lengthy duration of his frozen posture, the Brulé rounded the lava outcrop. Revealing himself briefly in bold silhouette against the lofty skyline, he knelt before the green quaking aspen brush he had gathered there in a neat pile the night before.

Sparks from the Indian's flint and steel ignited a cottonwood boll soaked with bear grease. When he had a flame going, the savage touched off the shredded leaves and pine needles which formed tinder under the green foliage.

Then, before the thick fuming smoke had a chance to rise, he covered the smouldering faggots with a buffalo rope.

Timing his movements with consummate skill, the Sioux buck gripped the corners of the furry robe and lifted it back for an instant, sending a spherical puff of thick yellowish-white smoke bouncing vertically into the rarified air.

Hundreds of feet above the chimney's pinnacle, the ball of smoke mushroomed off in an air current, dissolving into vaporous gauze against the blue zenith. The smoke-puff was followed by three more in quick succession, a longer interval, then another series of three.

Down in the pit of Deerhorn Creek's dry bed, Chief Buffalo Wolf and his braves would interpret this primeval code which for generations had told the Brulés that a

When a wagon-train of homeless hayshakers hits the Laramie Trail, with a six-gun sidewinder for a guide, it takes more than pitchforks to save their hides!

"One shot from you will drop the girl," Kile rasped. "I'll bargain with ye, Jeb. Roanna's life ag'in my getaway—"

foe was in a strategic position for surprise attack.

A HUNDRED yards in advance of the wagon train, Jeb Perrigan rode his sorrel stallion with a hipshot slouch, joshing with the black-haired girl in the linsey-woolsey blouse and jeans who rode the calico pony at his stirrup.

Throughout the morning they had paced the caravan's lumbering advance, this young giant in par-fleche jacket and wolverine cap, accompanied by Roanna, daughter of old Deacon Booneway who tooled the big Shuttler at the head of the column.

There was nothing in Perrigan's bantering mood to indicate that his senses were keyed to a high pitch of alertness this morning; that his eyes had kept the summit of Hawk's Perch under a close scrutiny for the past two hours, knowing its use as an Indian signal post.

Now, seeing the Sioux smoke signal which soared toward the sky from the lofty crag, the young wagon captain reined up his sorrel and jerked a Dragoon .45 from the holster at his thigh.

"Back to the wagons as fast as your hoss will take you, Roanna!" Perrigan ordered, meeting the girl's surprised gaze. "That talkin' smoke up yonder is Sioux sign that we're in for a fight any minute now—"

Color drained from the girl's bronzed cheeks, but she wasted no time in argument or inquiry. Wheeling the calico, she raked in the spurs as Perrigan triggered his Dragoon three times at the ground, the whip-crack echo of his shots bouncing off the slope to northward and striking swift panic through the hearts of the emigrants tooling the plodding wagons up the Trail.

Back on the driver's seat of the Shuttler which led the caravan, brindle-whiskered Deacon Booneway snapped out of a doze and swung his mule-span sharply to the left. Three shots from the advance rider was a signal to whip the train into a tight circle with all possible speed, as a scorpion might twist its nose to touch its tail.

Roanna Booneway reached the lead wagon at a tight gallop, pulling up to meet her father's inquiring stare as the grizzled skypilot whipsawed his team in a turn which threatened to capsize the heavily-loaded Shuttler.

"What's up, Roanna?" a faded woman in gray sunbonnet and challie sacque called anxiously from the back end of the wagon.

"Injun sign, ma!" the girl made answer. "Jeb says—"

Her words were lost in the rataplan of hoofbeats as Jeb Perrigan pounded back along the thinly-defined trace of last year's wagon tracks, hauling his Sharps buffalo rifle from its rawhide boot under his saddle fender.

At the moment, there seemed no visible reason to the emigrants why Kerrigan had ordered the sudden defensive maneuver. The Wyoming landscape was as placid and sylvan as the somnolent hills of Vermont which the Booneways had left behind them.

Then it came: a soul-chilling cacophony of sound blended of Indian war-whoops and the sharp spate of gunnery hammering its death-song from the rim of Deerhorn Creek's defile, which the wagons had been skirting.

The lumbering Conestoga mudwagons behind Booneway moved ponderously to swing away from the gulch, exposing their hooded canopies broadside to the hail of barbed arrows which rained out of nowhere to assault the emigrant caravan.

Perrigan's thin-bearded face was a blur through the dust as he quartered in front of Booneway's wheeling mules at a dead gallop, making for the drag end of the column.

One of Booneway's swing-span mules went down, braying piteously, the feathered shafts of Sioux arrows jutting from its belly, the animal's sagging carcass halting the rest of the team in their traces.

Midway down the caravan, a sleet of bullets cut down the plodding oxen hitched to a jouncing Studebaker piled high with gunpowder barrels. Drivers caught between the two stalled wagons yelled in panic, momentarily without leadership, unable on their own to figure out how to rank the wagons into a closed circle for a defense against the Indian attack.

Up to now, the wagoneers had not glimpsed their red foe. But with the caravan thrown into confused disorder, trapped in the open, the ambushed Sioux poured out of their claybank ambush in a phalanx of Hunkpapa ponies.

At first glimpse, it seemed that the train was being encircled by riderless horses, so cunningly were the feather-bonneted red-

skins mounted on the off sides of their ponies, exposing only a moccasin sole and a dusky elbow.

Dust whorled up from churning wheels to blend with founting gunsmoke as the attacking Sioux completed their encirclement of the chaotic scene. Fire-arrows described smoke-trailing parabolas, their blazing tips impaling canvas wagon-hoods and starting fires all along the disordered line.

The air was rent with the catastrophic screams of wounded animals, the wailing of women and children, the bitter profanity of drovers who dropped their leathern ribbons to snatch up guns.

Jeb Perrigan saw the impossibility of forming a squared circle. This was the first large-scale Indian skirmish they had encountered in the eight hundred miles of Oregon Trail which lay between them and their starting point at Saint Joe. Disaster found the raw hayshakers too undisciplined to meet the emergency.

Perrigan reined up at the drag-end of the column, bullets whistling past his ears as he shouted orders for each driver to barricade himself in his wagon box.

The surprise had been devastating, complete. The Sioux, numbering close to a hundred braves, were riding in a wide circle around the caravan, which had split up into units like the segments of a chopped-up snake.

Pressing their advantage, the redskins kept just out of short-gun range, their speeding mounts a difficult target for paleface counter-fire.

Kentucky Gibbons, the big wheelwright whose Studebaker was loaded with gunpowder kegs for trading purposes along the Trail, scrambled out from under his stalled wagon and sprinted through a hail of Indian lead. Fire arrows had set his wagon ablaze, adding the threat of explosion to the peril of the moment.

The whiskered wheelwright dove under the box of Booneway's Shuttler. Roanna was crouched below the front bolsters, the barrel of her father's Henry rifle thrust between the spokes of a front wheel. For a preacher's daughter, she was shooting and reloading her piece with rock-steady deliberation which brought a glint of admiration to Gibbons' eyes.

"This mess is your friend Perrigan's fault, leading us up the North Fork ag'in Red Kile's judgment," the Kentuckian growled, squinting down his rifle barrel and dumping a charging Sioux buck over his horse's crupper. "What have we got a scout fer, if'n it ain't to dodge these red devils?"

Roanna winced as Gibbons' burning Studebaker exploded in a flash of pink fire and billowing smoke which brought a rain of splintered matchwood and mangled ox flesh deluging the battle ground.

With the stunning echo of the blast still numbing her ears, the girl turned angrily toward the big Kentuckian sprawled in the grass at her side. Her retort was lost on Gibbons' ears, coming so close to the deafening concussion of the erupting gunpowder.

"It was Red Kile's duty to spot this ambuscade before the wagons got to it, Mr. Gibbons. Jeb was—"

The girl broke off as she followed the line of Gibbons' gesturing arm, off in the direction of the Laramies.

"We've seed the last of that buckskinner, Roanna. Look what the danged idjut is up to!"

As a vagrant wind cleared the pall of smoke which umbrella-ed the caravan, the girl beheld an amazing thing.

JEB PERRIGAN had joined the caravan at the River Platte, backed by a reputation for being without a peer as an Oregon Trail guide and wagon master. Now he was proving it, but with suicide as the only foreseeable outcome.

Breaking away from the beleaguered line of wagons, the buckskin-clad trailblazer was spurring his sorrel out into the open, in full view of the circling Indians. One arm was raised with the buffalo gun pointing toward the sky. And to the ears of the dumfounded whites behind him there came back a strange, alien cry from their wagon captain's lips—something that resembled an Indian war cry and a dying man's scream.

Incredibly, the red attackers ceased fire, responding to the command of a lifted war-lance held by their tribal chief. Straight toward the chief Jeb Perrigan was riding now, mouthing his unearthly yell, his buffalo rifle lifted in both upraised hands, as if challenging the savages to impale his chest with a point-blank javelin thrust or an arrow.

Perrigan reined up within arm's reach of the Sioux chief, who wore a trailing feather bonnet, warpaint and buffalo-hide shield.

It was a mad, suicidal, foolhardy thing, this charge of Perrigan's; a move that had put him beyond gunshot range of the pale-faces backing him.

Staring in amazement, Roanna Booneway saw their wagon master gesticulating and arguing volubly with the mounted Brulé chief, saw the Indian answer in the same manner.

And then, as if there had been strong magic in Perrigan's medicine, the Indian wheeled his war pony about and headed toward the lifting purple reaches of the Laramie foothills.

Drawn after their chief came the rank and file of warriors who a moment before had been closing in on the doomed caravan, scalping blades ready for the kill.

Jeb Perrigan remained seated astride his sorrel mustang, waving to acknowledge certain individuals in the passing file of redskins, his moccasin-clad feet brushing the stirrup-high buffalo grass which carpeted the plain. His eyes remained fixed on the retreating Indians until they had vanished like quail into the empty solitude of the brooding hills.

Then, booting his Sharps, Perrigan reined back toward the wagon train, riding in to meet the questioning stares of the hundred-odd souls he had rescued from certain massacre.

"I'll be teetotally damned for a scallywag," Kentucky Gibbons whispered in Roanna's ear as they crawled out from under the Shuttler. "We been follerin' the lead of a white Injun. . . ."

II

JERKILY, like a wax tableau coming to life, the wagon train's complement bestirred itself. Buffalo Wolf's abortive raid had taken its toll of dead and dying, brief as it had been. There were burning wagons to extinguish, a thing which could not wait for explanations of their miraculous delivery from doom.

Perrigan, his face austere under a veneer of dust, rode a circuit of the disorganized, broken perimeter of wagons, dropping an order here, nodding gravely to acknowledge a sobbed-out expression of thanksgiving there.

He was a tall, weather-scarred man, this buckskinner who had assumed the captaincy of the caravan back on the Platte two weeks back. Crowding thirty, Perrigan carried himself erect as an Indian. The suns and winds and snows of frontier life had burned his skin to a deep mahogany hue which, had it not been for his pale blue eyes and his short-clipped, sun-bleached blond beard, might have betokened a strain of Indian blood in his own veins.

It was a heterogeneous mixture of Oregon homeseekers, the personnel of this westbound train. Hayshakers from Ohio, drawling Pikers with their Missouri twang, a sprinkling of New England Yankees like the Deacon himself, drifters from the Deep South—a melting pot of humanity which had but one thing in common—their destination.

Deacon Booneway had assembled the weird assortment of Oregon-bound emigrants into one train. A funereal, balding giant of a man, Booneway was an ordained minister back in Vermont, seeking fresh fields of missionary endeavor out in the land where Marcus Whitman and Jason Lee and Father Smet had broken the ground ahead of him, carrying the faith to heathen tribes.

Booneway's wife and daughter and his worldly possessions were loaded on the big Shuttler he had bought back in Thetford for his junket West.

When Booneway had organized the wagon train back at Saint Joe, jumping-off place of the Oregon Trail, he had hired a buckskin man from the West to guide them to Oregon—Red Kile, who had ridden on ahead this fateful morning and had failed to spot the Sioux war party hiding in Deerhorn Creek's gully.

Kile was not a popular man in the train. His addiction to whiskey and his obnoxious use of profanity had been responsible for Booneway hiring Jeb Perrigan two weeks ago, relinquishing the captaincy of the wagon train to him on the recommendation of the army commander at Fort Laramie.

Other than his reputation for a keen knowledge of Trail conditions through the Indian country which lay ahead, no man knew much about Jeb Perrigan or his background. The young plainsman had kept aloof from the campfire psalm-sings at

night, had shared the society of no individual with the exception of Booneway's lovely daughter, Roanna.

Even this association was due to the girl's aggressiveness, not Perrigan's. He had been only tolerant of her company, and it was an increasingly common thing to see the Deacon's tomboy daughter mounted on her calico saddler, riding outpost with Jeb Perrigan. A matter for tongue-clucking among the females of the train, a source of grudging jealousy to Red Kile, the unkempt trailsman who had refused to accept dismissal and had stayed with the train after Perrigan joined it.

For reasons which were obscure to the emigrants, a festering rivalry had developed between Perrigan and Red Kile, leading to frequent clashes of opinion when decisions had to be made as to choice of routes.

"We camp here to repair wagons and bury our dead," Perrigan shouted an order which carried along the broken zig-zag of wagons. "Park corral fashion as usual. Conserve your water. We don't refill our barrels until we hit the Laramie again sometime tomorrow."

Perrigan halted his sorrel alongside Booneway's lead wagon. The rawboned preacher of the gospel had chosen to do his fighting from inside the Shuttler. Now he was climbing down over the tailgate, the limp form of his elderly wife cradled in his arms.

Limp in her faded sunbonnet and challie sacque, Mrs. Booneway had kept a date with her Maker here on the lonesome reaches of the Wyoming frontier. A Sioux arrow jutted from her breast.

Perrigan tugged off his wolverine cap in the presence of death. He lifted his eyes to meet the haunted, tear-streaked face of Roanna, peering from the puckered oval opening of the canvas hood, her hands crimsoned with her mother's lifeblood.

Grief could not dull the beauty of the girl's lustrous blue eyes and sun-tanned skin. Westering sunrays caught highlights in her clustering black hair, giving it the beautiful metallic blue sheen of a raven's plumage.

Booneway laid his wife's corpse gently on a blanket in the shade of the wagon and drew himself erect, his mouth clamped into a harsh line as hard as a split in a rock. Women from other wagons drew up, weeping softly as they stared at the dead features of the parson's wife.

"I'm sorry, Deacon," Perrigan husked out, running splayed fingers through his shock of thick yellow hair. "I had depended on Red Kile smoking out any hostiles on the trail ahead. Buffalo Wolf's warriors must have slipped into the Deerhorn behind Kile—"

Booneway's eyes flashed like fire behind ice, a new vitality contorting the blocky planes of his Yankee face.

"May the wrath of Almighty God be on your soul, Perrigan. I did not dream we had placed ourselves under the wing of a white savage, a brother of the redskins."

Perrigan jerked erect in his saddle, sensing a new-born hostility in the ranks of bullwhackers and sodbusters who were assembling around the lead wagon, ignoring his orders to make circle.

"You are referring to my pow-wow with Chief Buffalo Wolf just now?" he asked sharply. "Would you have rather seen your wife's scalp hanging from a Sioux lance?"

Booneway's face went bone white.

"Hark ye, neighbors!" he bellowed. "Perrigan confesses to knowing the leader of those savages!"

Perrigan swung stiffly out of stirrups, replacing his fur cap and turning a stony gaze toward the battery of stolid faces which ringed him about.

GET BACK to your wagons!" he bit out angrily. "Make circle. I don't anticipate any more Injun trouble today, but we're too small a train to be caught napping again. We're on the edge of Cheyenne country now. I won't be able to parley with Yellow Hatchet and his braves as I have just done with the Brulés."

No man moved to break the immobile group. Hoosier Jim Jipson, a black-whiskered farmer from Indiana, spat a gobbet of tobacco juice into the dust and rubbed a calloused hand across the curved stock of his belt gun.

"I take no further orders from an Injun-lover!" rasped the Hoosierite, a thick edge of menace riding his voice. "You got some explaining to do, Perrigan. Red Kile told us we'd run into Sioux trouble ifn we took the north fork, but you insisted—"

Perrigan shrugged, meeting calmly the mutiny in the eyes focused on him.

"It is lucky for all of us that I knew Chief Buffalo Wolf," he said somberly. "He was the only father I ever knew. . . . When I was a baby, my folks were massacred by Brulés over in the Niobrara country where my father was trapping for Astor. I would have died of starvation if it hadn't been for the milk from the bosom of Buffalo Wolf's squaw."

Kentucky Gibbons pulled in a shocked breath.

"You admit to sucklin' an' Injun? You was riz by them red sons? You got the gall to confess these things to us?"

The wagon captain nodded proudly.

"Until I was twelve years old, I couldn't speak a word of English. I had never seen a bearded paleface. I hunted game with Sioux kids my age, slept in their lodges, forked a Hunkpapa cayuse on the buffalo hunts every spring, ate pemmican and smoked fish. I have no shame in admitting these things. They are a part of me."

It was Roanna Booneway who broke the shocked silence which greeted Perrigan's frank and unembarrassed revelation.

"But you are a white man now, Jeb. And I am proud of you. . . ."

Perrigan went on speaking, as if oblivious to the girl's support, standing alone against the disgust and ire of her kind.

"When I was ten, a cavalry detachment jumped Buffalo Wolf's winter camp in the Medicine Bows. Massacred half of his tribe in cold blood, though the Brulés were not on the warpath and a treaty of perpetual friendship existed between them and the Great White Father . . . Buffalo Wolf was wounded. It was I who hid him in the brush, bandaged his cuts, nursed him back to health. Buffalo Wolf makes war on the paleface today because they broke a solemn treaty with his tribe. But my foster-father also pays his debt to a friend. You owe your lives to his honor this morning. He could have spared me and slain the rest of you."

His voice droned on, a metallic monotone, winding up the remaining details of his saga. In his twelfth year, white trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company, recognizing him as a white boy because of his blond hair, had captured Perrigan and taken him to the commandant at Fort Laramie—a half-wild, breech-clouted son of the wilderness.

It was at the military outpost that he had received his schooling during his teens and early 'twenties. Army records revealed his own past, but he had taken the name of the army officer who had adopted him. Until that day Perrigan had been known only by his Indian name of Swift Elk, which had been bestowed upon him by Chief Buffalo Wolf's squaw, Moon-on-the-Lake. . . .

"Getting back to business," Perrigan came back to face reality. "We will camp here today as I ordered, in spite of lack of water. In ten days we are scheduled to join Jim Bridger's rendezvous of wagons at the Sublette Cut-off. We can't risk missing that rendezvous as a result of any breakdowns of equipment. As long as I am captain of this caravan, my orders are law. You—"

A rataplan of hoofbeats coming downwind from the west hushed the rising voices of dissent which gripped the emigrant party. Wheeling as one, they caught sight of Red Kile, the trail scout, crossing Deerhorn Creek's defile and hammering across the flats toward them.

Kile reined up alongside the group by Booneway's wagon, red-bleared eyes shuttling in their greasy hammocks of fat as he surveyed the carnage.

A beefy, thick-jowled man of forty, Kile possessed a snarled bush of cinnamon-red whiskers which cascaded over his dirty horsehide jacket. He wore a plainsman's flat-crowned beaver hat and a pair of stag-horn-butted Dragoon Colts filled the thonged-down holsters at his flanks.

One of Kile's saddle pouches bulged with the jug of trade whiskey he carried along the Trail, in defiance of Booneway's strict regulations against the use of spirits.

"Injuns jumped you?" demanded the scout, swinging out of stirrups and shouldering through the crowd. "I told Perrigan we'd run up ag'in somethin' like this ifn we took the north fork—"

A clamor of voices broke in to inform Kile of what had happened, including the gist of Perrigan's personal confession. When they had finished, the hard-drinking trail scout turned to Perrigan with a crooked grin which exposed the man's battery of tobacco-stained, fanglike teeth.

"A gut-eatin' white Injun, are you?" Kile rasped. "If these Pikers know what's good for them they'll banish you here an' now, like I've said since the day you j'ined

us on the Platte. You'll be outlawed from one end of the Overland to the other when this gits out, you yeller-haired renegade—"

A wave of anger seethed up in Jeb Perrigan as he faced the whiskey-fouled blast of the scout's breath. Kile's insulting language cut to the core of the man, broke the shackles of iron self-restraint which he had built up during past weeks whenever Kile had sought to undermine his authority with the wagoneers.

Kile's beady eyes saw the blow coming, but too late to twist aside. Perrigan swung from knee level, his uppercut smashing against Kile's whisker-padded jaw to stagger the scout back against the wheel of Booneway's wagon.

Even as Kile sprawled to the dirt to slam his head against the Shuttler's hub, the trail scout's big hand stabbed to gun butt and Perrigan found himself facing the black bore of a cocked Dragoon.

Murder flashed in Kile's eyes, but he held his trigger as Roanna Booneway vaulted over her dead mother's prostrate form to throw herself in the line of fire.

"There is no cause for this," the girl cried frantically. "Jeb saved all our lives today. You deserved that blow, Mr. K—"

Heavy hands seized Perrigan from behind then. He felt his six-gun jerked from holster, felt Kentucky Gibbons' iron-muscled elbow cranked about his throat, strangling him.

Then the barrel of his own weapon clubbed across his temple and Perrigan's senses were snuffed out in a black vortex of oblivion.

NIGHT had come to the Wyoming prairie when Jeb Perrigan rallied out of it. He found himself tied in spread-eagle fashion to the sloping wheel of the wrecked Studebaker belonging to the Kentucky wheelwright, Gibbons. The shattered wagon box and front wheel assembly still smouldered in the darkness, blasted to junk by the exploding cargo of gunpowder.

Gradually, as his brain cleared and his eyes drew back into focus, Perrigan realized he was alone. A hundred yards away, the wagons were parked tongue-to-tailgate to form an enclosure where the livestock were bunched for the night.

Out of the blue dark came the sound of chanting voices lifted in the funereal strains of *Abide With Me*. The caravaneers had buried their dead during the afternoon, and this was their funeral service. On the morrow, livestock and wagons would be driven over the gravesites to prevent marauding Indians from desecrating their resting places. . . .

A sage-cloyed breeze stirred the sticky, blood-matted hair on Perrigan's temple. Sagging there in his bonds, he tried to rationalize, think things out.

In view of his deliverance of the wagon train from Buffalo Wolf's avenging Sioux, it was incredible that the emigrants could have turned against him so savagely, meting out this sort of treatment, as if he had been a traitor responsible for leading them into a massacre trap.

He saw the wicked hand of Red Kile back of this deal, and believed he knew the underlying motive for the scout's enmity toward him.

It went deeper than a mere jealousy of Perrigan's authority as wagon captain. Perrigan had seen the scout's crude overtures toward Roanna Booneway during the past weeks, knew that Kile felt a deep and bitter frustration because the girl's affections had been directed toward Perrigan instead of himself.

Their last clash of wills had occurred three days ago, at Inscription Rock where the Oregon Trail forked into parallel routes, one fork following the Laramie foothills, the other swinging south toward the Sweetwater.

Kile had stubbornly insisted on taking the longer southern route, despite Perrigan's sure knowledge that Chief Yellow Hatchet and his Cheyenne killers had their hunting grounds in that area and were known to be harassing such wagon trains as moved into the Sweetwater country this summer.

On the other hand, today's assault by the Brulé Sioux under old Buffalo Wolf would not have occurred had the caravaneers accepted Kile's choice of routes. To that degree, the deaths of Mrs. Booneway and the others in today's brief melee might be attributed directly to Perrigan's bad judgment.

But Jeb Perrigan had accepted the captaincy of Booneway's wagon train with the understanding that he was to reach Sublette's Cut-Off, in time to rendezvous with

a number of wagon trains led by Jim Bridger, the celebrated mountaineer.

Such a rendezvous would give Booneway's emigrants the added protection of traveling toward Idaho with better than a hundred other wagons, which would assure them safe passage through the territory infested by hostile Nez Perces and Blackfeet.

It was because the shorter Laramie trail would enable the slow-moving caravan to make connection with Bridger at the junction of the California trail which had caused Perrigan to overrule Kile's choice of the Sweetwater route, as much as the urgency of avoiding a brush with Yellow Hatchet's Cheyennes. . . .

A crunch of boots over rubble reached Perrigan's ears above the tom-tomming of blood in his eardrums, above the keening wail of the mourners over at the wagons. He twisted his head to make out the towering silhouette of Deacon Booneway against the star-dusted Wyoming sky.

Booneway circled the smoking wreckage of Gibbons' wagon and halted before Perrigan, reaching out to check the knots of the rawhide ropes which bound the captain's arms and legs to the spokes of the big wheel.

"Why do you allow this, Deacon?" panted Perrigan hoarsely. "I am no traitor. Even Kile can't deny that you are all alive tonight because of my kinship with the Brulés who attacked us—"

Booneway wiped flame from a sulphur match and puffed at a malodorous corncob, his face etched with deep ruts of fatigue and grief in the match's flare.

"You had no call to strike down Kile as you did, son," Booneway said gently. "You know my abhorrence of violence. You have my foolish daughter to thank for not stopping a bullet."

Perrigan grinned bleakly, stirring his muscles against the constricting pressure of his bonds.

"We held a sort of drumhead court regarding you this afternoon," Booneway went on. "It is the considered judgment of my people that you were guilty of criminal negligence in leading us into Sioux country against the express warning of Mr. Kile."

Anger flushed Perrigan's face, brought a sudden throb of pain to his pistol-bruised temple.

"If those Injuns had been Cheyennes, where would we be now? How can Kile answer the logic of that?"

The preacher shrugged, twin ribbons of smoke purling from his flat nostrils.

"Kile believes today's attack by the Sioux was premature, an abortive raid due to a mix-up in the timing of your plot with the Brulés. Kile argues that you told Buffalo Wolf to withdraw and wait until we joined Bridger's wagons at the Cut-off next week, so he would have more scalps to add to his collection."

Perrigan remained silent, sickened by the cunning of such deliberate falsehoods. Kile knew that Buffalo Wolf's small war party would never dare attack a white group of such strength as Bridger's consolidated trains.

"We buried nine people tonight, Perrigan," Booneway said. "Four of them women, two of them babes in arms. Three fathers of families who are forced to continue on to Fort Walla Walla bereft of their breadwinners. There was even talk of lynching you tonight among the younger hotheads in my party. You have me to thank for persuading them to keep you prisoner, though the consensus is that we lost our loved ones through your connivance with the Sioux."

Again, Perrigan could find no voice to raise in answer to such wanton ingratitude.

"You will be turned over to the army at Fort Sunset," the Deacon said, tapping the dottle from his pipe against the iron wagon tire at Perrigan's shoulder. "If you can convince the commandant there of your innocence, I shall make no attempt to interfere with your release. It is the will of the majority, not necessarily my private feeling in the matter, Jeb."

III

BOONEWAY stalked off in the night, heading back toward the parked wagons. The hymn-singing was over now. Livestock were bedded down against the squared circle of wagons, night guards posted.

A brooding silence descended over the Wyoming hills. . . .

Around midnight Perrigan was roused from a semi-stupor by a soft thud of hoofs approaching the ruined wagon. He stiffened in his bonds, a chill prescience telling

him that Red Kile was coming to extract his vengeance while the others slept.

Then he recognized the horse as his own sorrel, its high-horned saddle empty, his Sharps rifle still in the scabbard. Someone was leading the horse in his direction. Not until he caught the outlines of a girl's slim form did he recognize his visitor as Roanna Booneway.

"Jeb?"

The girl's voice was low-pitched, anxious, as if she was not sure she would find him conscious or even alive.

"Over here, Roanna. . . ."

She hitched the sorrel to the fire-charred tongue of the Studebaker wagon and moved toward him, starlight flashing on a knife blade as she groped a hand toward the wagon wheel, found the ropes which bound his arms to the hickory felloes.

A moment later Perrigan was stepping free of the wheel and turned to face the girl, gripping her shoulders in his strong brown hands. In the starglow her face was a strained, white oval, damp with tears.

"They turned your horse loose to graze in the open or I would never have been able to bring him to you, Jeb," Roanna whispered, a shudder rippling through her and transmitting itself to his hands. "You must leave the wagon train tonight, Jeb."

He laughed softly in the darkness, disillusion needling him.

"And be branded along the Overland as a fugitive, an outlaw in league with the Indians?" he countered. "Kile would want me to do just that, Roanna."

"But if you remain with the train—"

"Your father has promised me safe passage as far as Fort Sunset on the Green River," Perrigan cut in. "I'm ready to plead my case with the military there. My Indian background is nothing I'm ashamed of, nothing I've kept secret. It is that very background that has given me the experience to lead wagons up the Trail."

She was pressing something into his hand, and he recognized the cold bulk of his Dragoon and holster belt.

"I understand all that, Jeb," she whispered brokenly. "But Kile is drunk tonight. He swears you will not live to reach the Fort. All the men who lost loved ones today, with the exception of my grieving father—they are backing Kile. So are level heads like Hoosier Jim Jipson and Kentucky Gibbons. They feel you led us deliberately into Sioux country, Jeb."

Perrigan digested the girl's reasoning thoughtfully as he strapped on his holster and checked the caps on the nipples of his Dragoon revolver.

He realized Kile's dangerous temperament, drunk or sober; recognized the scout's influence over men whose judgment had been warped by the sight of their loved ones' graves tonight. In all probability, the scout had been put in command of the train today, as a result of the kangaroo court trial which had convicted Perrigan.

Roanna's next words confirmed his hunch.

"Kile has been placed in full charge," she said. "He is swinging the wagons south into the Cheyenne country at dawn tomorrow, even though it means missing our rendezvous with your friend Jim Bridger at the Cut-off junction. Kile says he can get us safely to Oregon, alone."

Perrigan stepped past the girl, untying his mount's reins from the splintered wagon tongue. After checking his saddle cinch, he turned, saw Roanna choke back a sob and rush into his arms.

They clung to each other a long moment there under the stars, lips meeting in their first kiss. She was the first woman Perrigan had ever loved, white or Indian, and the feel of her young body crushed against him set his pulses racing in ecstasy.

"I love you, Jeb," she breathed against his cheek. "I'll wait for you out in Oregon no matter—no matter how long it may be before God wills that we should meet again—"

He swung into stirrups then and reined his horse about, his eyes straying briefly to the faintly-visible circle of covered wagons across the flats.

"Kile is leading you into trouble, Roanna," he said gravely. "But when disaster breaks, darling, remember I won't be far away. We were not meant to be apart, you and I—"

And then he was gone, a specter on horseback dipping out of sight into the brush-hemmed draw of Deerhorn Creek, where that morning the foster-father of his boyhood years had lurked in hiding with his painted savages, eyes waiting for the smoke signal from the sentinel on Hawk's Perch. . . .

THE GRAY promise of the false dawn was tingeing the eastern hills when Red Kile and four grim-faced wagoneers from the ranks of Booneway's party slipped across the flats to Gibbons' ruined Studebaker and discovered Perrigan's escape.

Coiled over the scout's hairy forearm was a lariat, its honda end fashioned into the sinister five-roll loop of a hangman's noose. Some distance away was the lightning-charred skeleton of a cottonwood which they had selected during the night as the site of Perrigan's lynching.

Out of Kile's whiskey jug had come the verdict for speedy justice, a decision to leave the wagon captain's corpse as buzzard bait.

"Jeb didn't wiggle loose by his own self, Red!" snarled Kentucky Gibbons, dropping on one knee to pick up the knife-severed remnants of rawhide ropes which had bound Perrigan to the wagon wheel. "Somebody cut him free—"

Kile's whiskey-blotched face purpled in the gray light. Cords stood out on his bull neck as he stared at the severed thongs in the wheelwright's hands.

"It was the filly, Roanna!" choked the trail scout. "Or mebbe it was the Deacon hisself. He had ideas of dabbing his loop on Perrigan for a son-in-law, I'd bet my last chip on that."

Hoosier Joe Jipson, the lanky Indianan who had lost a bride and a son who had been born prematurely in the wagon as a result of yesterday's Indian raid, crossed himself piously and bent a quizzical stare at his comrades.

"I cain't say as how I'm sorry Perrigan give us the slip, men," he spoke finally. "The Lord give us no right to take a man's life like we planned to do this mornin' . . . I'm goin' back to the circle and be damned to the cowardly lot of you."

The others broke away to follow Hoosier Joe toward the wagons, leaving Kile to cool off as he saw fit.

When the sun's rim tipped over the horizon to paint the Hawk's Roost into a bloody shaft piercing the sky, Kile broke out of his abstraction and headed back to the caravan to assume his new duties as wagon master.

Breakfast fires smoked in the enclosure. Mules and oxen were harnessed and yoked. Before the sun was an hour old the wagons were lurching southward across the sage flats, leaving the North Fork through the Laramies and pushing toward the domain of Chief Yellow Hatchet and his scalp-hunting Cheyennes. . . .

From the lofty aerie of the Hawk's Perch, Jeb Perrigan squatted beside the cold smudge of ashes from the Brulé's signal fire and watched the prairie schooners lumber into hostile country.

His eyes followed Booneway's red-wheeled Shuttler in the lead of that snake-like string of canvas hoods, knowing that Roanna would be crouched on the seat beside her bereaved father, her thoughts and prayers riding with him.

When the Dearborn carriage at the end of the line dropped out of sight beyond the shoulder of a hogback, Perrigan made his way to the base of the chimney and mounted his ground-tied sorrel.

He rode north, away from the direction Red Kile was leading Booneway's emigrant train. He kept pushing deeper into the familiar Laramie uplands where he had hunted buffalo and trapped beaver in his primitive youth.

By noon he had reached the Pony Creek tributary to the Platte and followed the stream into country which was still as untamed as it had been in the era before the arrival of the Long Knives. He skirted grazing herds of buffalo and antelope, bearing ever to the northward into the Brulé hunting ground.

The sun was setting like a pink egg into a fleecy nest of scarlet cloud when Perrigan topped a rise and caught the faint sweet bite of woodsmoke beyond a stand of lodgepole pines in a bend of Pony Creek.

Pushing through the timber, he raised the hide lodges of the Brulés' summer village beyond the ford. It was the first time in twenty years that he had beheld an encampment of the tribe which, having orphaned him with their tomahawks, had raised him to be a mighty hunter named Swift Elk. . . .

Sioux squaws, pounding maize on the flat rocks by the river's edge, recognized the lithe white man as he splashed his stud across the stream and entered the circle of teepees.

Riding tall and proud in the saddle, the bearded paleface approached without fear of arrow or bullet, secure in his place as adopted son of the venerable Buffalo Wolf.

Then he saw the old chief emerging from a council lodge with his medicine man, an arm lifted in greeting. The coppery hand held a calumet pipe stoked with *kinickinick* bark and hung with eagle feathers and bear claws, a token of friendship for the white brave he had once called son.

"We hoped you would visit us before you followed the Great Medicine Trail toward the setting sun, Swift Elk," the seamy-faced old chieftain greeted him in the gutteral Brulé jargon. "We spared your paleface brothers yesterday because we knew you spoke with a single tongue in asking us not to destroy them."

His face rutted with lines of fatigue and hunger, the blood still caked on his skull from the blow he had received at the wagon camp, Jeb Perrigan accepted the peacepipe and drew a puff from it.

Warriors gathered about him, bucks in the prime of life whom Perrigan had known as striplings. They looked at his straw-yellow beard with awe and wonderment.

Half-forgotten Brulé language returned to Swift Elk's tongue as he entered the chief's lodge and spoke to the wrinkled old squaw who squatted there, chewing a strip of buckskin to soften it before fashioning the leather into moccasins.

She was Moon-on-the-Lake, at whose breast Perrigan had fed three decades past, the only mother he could remember.

They fed him later, buffalo steaks and parched maize and roots.

Still later, when dusk had mellowed the land and campfires flickered on the deerhide walls of the Brulé wigwams, Perrigan came to the point of his visit, restless against any further delay in deference to the Indian custom of postponing talk.

With sign language and what he recalled of the Brulé dialect, Perrigan recounted Red Kile's perfidy and the movement of the palefaces' wagons into the lands of the Brulé's hereditary enemy, the Cheyennes of Chief Yellow Hatchet.

"I seek a messenger, the swiftest brave in your tribe, my father," Perrigan told the chief. "Bid him rope his fleetest cayuse and ride to the blockhouse at the fork of the Great Medicine Trail with a message for the mighty hunter he will find there."

Buffalo Wolf nodded gravely and spoke to the inscrutable medicine-man who shared

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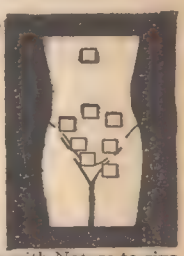
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the honor of their pow-wow. The shaman lifted the teepee fly and headed out into the night to obey the chief's command.

Taking a strip of bark from Moon-on-the-Lake's pile of fuel, Perrigan scribbled a message thereon with the soft tip of a pistol bullet:

JIM BRIDGER,
SUBLETTE'S JUNCTION

HOLD YOUR WAGONS A FEW DAYS TO ENABLE MY CARAVAN TO MAKE RENDEZVOUS WITH YOU FOR THE TREK TO FORT BOISE.

THE SAFETY OF FORTY-TWO WAGONS AND A HUNDRED SOULS DEPENDS ON JOINING YOU. I SHALL PROCEED WITH THE ASSUMPTION THAT YOU WILL WAIT FOR ME.

GRANT THE INDIAN WHO BEARS THIS MESSAGE PRESENTS OF WAMPUM AND TRADE GOODS, AND GIVE HIM SAFE PASSAGE TO HIS HUNTING GROUNDS.

YOUR FRIEND, PERRIGAN

Within a few minutes Perrigan saw his message to the old mountaineer in the hands of a trusted young brave and started on its way to Sublette's Cut-off. Jim Bridger was unable to read a word, but someone would translate the message for him. On Bridger's whim rested the fate of Booneway's doomed caravan. . . .

IV

THEIR THIRD night inside hostile Cheyenne country, Deacon Booneway's wagons camped in a cottonwood grove on the upper Sweetwater. For two days now, nervous emigrants had eyed the "talking smokes" which Indians sent up from widely-scattered peaks between them and the sanctuary of Fort Sunset on the Green, proof that the passage of the caravan was under the constant surveillance of Chief Yellow Hatchet's murderous Cheyennes.

Now, with the placid waters of the river guarding their camp on three sides and a steep hogback shielding them on the fourth sector, animals were staked out to graze in the lush bluestem and the Oregon-bound caravaneers turned to the pleasanter tasks of filling their water casks, greasing axles and mending harness.

Red Kile, his temper rubbed to a surly pitch due to an empty whiskey jug, saddled up during the interval between dusk and moonrise and announced to Deacon Booneway that he intended to spend the night scouting the stretch of open country across the Sweetwater.

"Ifn I ain't showed up by mornin', ford the river downstream at the willer brakes an' steer for Warbonnet Notch yander," Kile gave his instructions. "I'll j'ine up with ye in time to eat a snack of bait at the noon stop."

Booneway fingered his grounded Henry rifle nervously.

"With Perrigan gone, we'd be without a guide in case Injuns jumped you out there tonight," the Vermont parson pointed out nervously. "Is it necessary to scout at night this way, Kile?"

The red-bearded buckskinner laughed.

"I ain't a-scairt o' Yellow Hatchet liftin' my hair, Reverend. Cheyennes are sneaky as kiyotes. They thump their war drums daytime and move by night. If any of them red varmints are on the prowl, night is the time to spot the mangey sons. Camped here, you folks are as safe as ifn you was in God's pocket. Take my word for that."

Booneway watched the trail scout ride off up the hillslope beyond the cottonwood grove with a prescience of disaster gnawing at him. If only Jeb Perrigan were here. . . .

Up to now, Booneway had no clues concerning Jeb Perrigan's mysterious getaway from the Laramie foothills. If, as the grapevine had it, his own daughter was responsible for Perrigan's escape, Booneway was too discreet to question Roanna. Secretly, a conviction was shaping up in the skypilot that the verdict of the kangaroo court, given in the heat of anger and grief following the deaths of nine of their number at the hands of the Sioux, had not been justified by the facts.

Sentries had been posted along the crest of the hogback overlooking the camp and at strategic intervals beside the curve of the riverbank, to sound the alarm in case Indians attempted to approach the bedground.

As Red Kile spurred through the cordon of rifle-toting guards, he caught sight of Roanna Booneway making a circuit of the sentries, toting a jug of hot coffee. At midnight the girl would leave her blankets to make the rounds again, carrying coffee and jerky to the graveyard shift.

Kile's whiskey-thickened voice arrested

the girl as she was walking down the far slope toward the first guard post on the bank of the Sweetwater. She halted, scowling up at the bushy-whiskered trail scout as he spurred in front of her.

"Got a hot drink for old Red tonight, sweetheart?" leered the scout, bending from saddle.

Without answering, the girl held a tin cup under the spout of the jug, balancing it on a gypsum boulder. The warm aroma of the coffee wafted up to Kile's nostrils as he bent down to hook an arm around the girl's neck.

"And how about a kiss to go with it, my little partridge?" Kile chuckled hoarsely. "With Perrigan gone you must be lonesome these moonlight nights, eh?"

With a sharp cry of disgust, the girl flung the scalding coffee in Kile's face, jerking free of his arm as he drew back, mouthing an obscenity.

"If Jeb were here he would horse-whip you for daring to lay a filthy paw on me, you drunken swine!" she bit out. "If it weren't that we would be helpless without you I'd report this insult to my father—"

Red Kile moved fast then, giving the girl no chance to pick up her jug and flee into the darkness. Kneeing his big stallion to push the girl against the gypsum rock, the buckskin man whipped a Dragoon pistol from his holster and clubbed the barrel viciously across the girl's head.

Without a sound, Roanna Booneway wilted to the ground. Red Kile slid out of stirrups, the night breeze cooling the raw blistered expanse of his face.

Lifting the girl effortlessly, Kile flung her across his saddle. Then he vaulted the stallion's rump, gathered up the reins and spurred swiftly down the shadow-clotted hillside.

A mile upstream he forded the shallow Sweetwater. On the north bank he dismounted, fished a hank of rawhide thongs from his saddlebags and bound the girl's wrists and ankles securely.

Then, with Roanna's limp form jackknifed across his saddle, Kile headed northwestward toward the purple outlines of the Axblade Buttes, from whose staggered crests Indian smoke signals had appeared at intervals all afternoon. *Signals meant for the eyes of Red Kile himself....*

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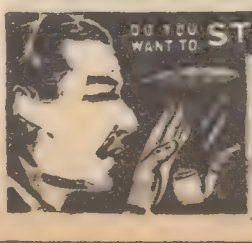

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IT WAS nearing midnight when the trail scout spotted the conical teepees of a Cheyenne encampment at the base of the Axblades. A buck challenged him from a rocky outcrop and Kile made answer in the tribal jargon.

Owl-hoot signals passed down the line of outposts guarding the Cheyenne camp and by the time Red Kile had reached the teepees, the camp was swarming with painted braves in full war regalia, gathering about Kile's stallion and jabbering gutterally in the Cheyenne tongue as they stared at the girl carried across the renegade's saddle.

Yellow Hatchet, gray-haired chief of the Cheyennes, emerged from his lodge as Kile was dismounting.

"You have brought the palefaces into our domain, brother of the Red Scalplock," grunted the Indian whose name was a dreaded thing along the bloody reaches of the Oregon Trail. "Furs and buffalo hides are waiting to pay our white brother."

Kile grinned avariciously as he saw the stack of pelt-laden travois racked near the council lodge.

"The paleface squaw is my prize," Kile said gruffly, lifting Roanna off the horse. "You have firewater for a thirsty brother, Yellow Hatchet?"

The Cheyenne chief shook his head as he led Kile into the lodge. The renegade lowered the white girl to a pile of reasty buffalo robes inside the teepee.

Helpless in her bonds, Roanna Booneway groped back to consciousness in time to see the Cheyennes mounting their war ponies outside the open flap of the lodge.

Within the hour, Red Kile was leading Yellow Hatchet and his braves away from the Axblade Buttes, in the direction of the wagon train camped on the Sweetwater.

Except for a few squaws and papooses and warriors too aged or infirm to ride the warpath tonight, the Cheyenne village was deserted. Roanna's lips moved in fervent prayer as the realization of Red Kile's duplicity overwhelmed her. She was remembering how Red Kile had been Perrigan's most bitter critic, accusing him of being a white savage in league with the Sioux.

All along, she realized now, Kile had been plotting to lead the unsuspecting wagon train into Yellow Hatchet's domain, where it would be easy prey for surprise attack. Tonight's actions proved why Kile had refused to leave the train back on the Platte, why he had used every resource at his command to veer Booneway's wagons into the south fork of the Oregon Trail, deep into the Cheyenne country.

Shielding her reason from hysteria tonight was only the memory of Jeb Perrigan's parting words to her, over in the Laramies three nights before:

"When disaster breaks, beloved, remember I will not be far away. We were not meant to be far apart, you and I—"

V

THE CHEYENNE attack came in the bleak hour immediately preceding the dawn, when the vigilance of the wagon train's sentries was at lowest ebb, the traditional hour for Indian assault.

Out of the pine scrub on the prairie floor east of the river bend the Cheyennes came, their first burst of gunfire dropping skylined lookouts on the ridge. The full force of the galloping horde streamed over the hillcrest before the alarm could be sounded to rouse the sleepers in the wagons parked in the cottonwood flats below.

Dawn's first ruddy light found Deacon Booneway and his beleaguered caravaneers leaping out of bedrolls to seize their guns, with the vanguard of the Cheyenne attackers already swarming through the trees.

The first volley of Cheyenne arrows was followed by a soul-curdling chorus of banshee warwhoops as painted savages slid off their ponies and darted from tree to tree to invade the heart of the wagon circle, carrying the raid into hand-to-hand proximity.

Tomahawks cleaved white scalps. War lances disemboweled stampeding animals. Gunpowder and the odor of spilled blood and the cacophony of Cheyenne war cries made a pandemonium of the dawn.

And then, from across the narrow waters of the encircling river, came an answering shout from Indian throats.

Kentucky Gibbons, locked in a grapple with a warrior whose scalping blade was questing for his throat, was the first white man to see the phalanx of feather-bonneted Indians who rode out into the Sweetwater, the morning's red light glinting off rifle barrels and iron-tipped lances.

Despair hit Gibbons in the very act of

plunging his hunting knife into his adversary's ribs. It was his belief that the raiders were being reinforced by another hundred warriors, attacking from the river side of the camp.

And then the emigrants heard the voice of their leader lifting above the howls of the Cheyennes and the crackle of guns:

"The blessed Lord be praised!" Deacon Booneway bawled. "Jeb Perrigan brings his Sioux brothers to our rescue!"

It was true. The inexperienced emigrants fighting for their lives inside the perimeter of wagons did not recognize the different breed of the red men who were pounding up the nearby river bank to their rescue, but they recognized the bannering head-dress of Buffalo Wolf and the welcome sight of Jeb Perrigan leading the first Sioux out of the river.

With hoarse cries of panic, Chief Yellow Hatchet and his Cheyenne braves headed back into the cottonwoods in a vain attempt to catch the milling war ponies they had quit in the first flush of triumph over what they believed would be an easy conquest of white mens' scalps.

Caught unhorsed, Cheyenne warriors dropped before the concentrated fire-power of Sioux muskets. Mortal enemies from the dawn of history, Yellow Hatchet's tribesmen and Buffalo Wolf's band met in a confused melee of clashing tomahawks and bleeding copper bodies.

Through the smoke and dust and confusion of battle, Jeb Perrigan caught sight of the foe he had singled out for his own quarry, during the swift miles of a chase which he had led across the prairies in an effort to head off Yellow Hatchet's skulking trek from the Axblade Buttes.

Red Kile, his cinnamon beard bannering in the wind, had remained aloof on the ridge crest above the wagon camp.

Now, seeing disaster overtake his Cheyenne confederates, the renegade trail scout sought refuge in flight. Wheeling his stallion, Kile headed northward toward the river.

Jeb Perrigan crossed the Sweetwater at a point a hundred yards upstream from the spot Kile had chosen for his getaway. The two men reached the north bank simultaneously.

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strength, realizing his life was at stake in a no-quarter finish fight, Kile headed for the Axblade Buttes in the hope of finding sanctuary in the Cheyenne camp.

Keeping his prey in view, Perrigan concentrated on cutting down the renegade's lead. But his own horse was gaunted from its long trek into the Cheyenne country from Buffalo Wolf's lair, and he realized that Kile's retribution was now a matter of the stamina remaining to their respective horses.

The sun was an hour high when Red Kile sent his staggering, gory-flanked stallion bucketing into the shadow of the Axblades with Perrigan already within rifle range behind him.

WITHERED squaws and venerable Cheyenne warriors looked up in amazement from their breakfast fires as they saw Kile fling himself out of stirrups and lurch toward the lodge of Yellow Hatchet, choosing the flimsy shelter of the deerhide wigwam for his last stand.

Ignoring the Cheyennes who scattered before his reeling horse, Jeb Perrigan hit the ground alongside the lather-dripping mount which Kile had abandoned.

The smooth-bore buffalo gun remained in its saddle boot as Perrigan stalked grimly toward the lodge where Kile had vanished. The Dragoon .45 was in his fist when he saw the trail scout reappear in the opening of the teepee, holding Roanna Booneway's trussed-up body as a living shield between him and Perrigan's gun.

"Drop . . . your gun . . . and elevate, Perrigan!" Kile's voice came in a winded caw, as he thrust a gun barrel into view under the girl's armpit. "One shot from you will drop the girl . . . I'll bargain with ye, Jeb. Roanna's life ag'in my getaway—"

Roanna Booneway saw Perrigan halt a dozen feet away, indecision checking his trigger. And then, with a violent forward thrust of her body which caught her captor off guard, Roanna jerked the buckskin-clad renegade off balance.

Kile's gun roared beside the girl's head, blistering her flesh with its muzzle blast. The slug ricocheted off the rocky earth between Perrigan's wide-spread legs as he watched Kile go down on his knees, losing his grip on the girl's body.

Roanna flung herself sideways and rolled out of Perrigan's line of fire. Even as Kile jerked himself to a kneeling position and eased back the hammer of his fuming Colt for a second shot, Perrigan squeezed trigger.

Red flame spewed from the bore of Perrigan's .45. Through fogging powdersmoke he saw Kile's body jerk under the impact of a slug tunneling his forehead.

Then Perrigan was sheathing his gun. A hunting knife flashed in his hand as he strode forward to slash the girl's bonds.

Stolid-faced Cheyennes offered no resistance as the white man led the girl back to the two horses and helped her astride Kile's stallion.

The corpse of Red Kile lay where it had fallen in the door of Yellow Hatchet's lodge.

But Yellow Hatchet was not destined to return to that lodge with his warriors today. At the very moment that Perrigan and Roanna Booneway headed back toward the Sweetwater, Yellow Hatchet's scalp was dripping from the handle of Chief Buffalo Wolf's lance. . . .

Three riders converged across the open plain toward the wagon train which Deacon Booneway pushed across the Sweetwater later that morning.

One of the riders was a slim Sioux buck, bearing a message from Jim Bridger at Sublette's Cut-off, a message which Jeb Perrigan read aloud to the girl seated on the horse beside him.

"Your father's caravan is safe from here on in, Roanna," Perrigan grinned. "Bridger will wait for us at the rendezvous—"

Back on the east bank of the Sweetwater, Buffalo Wolf and his triumphant Brulé warriors had finished counting coup on their perennial enemies, the slain Cheyennes. And the Sioux who had shared Perrigan's uncivilized boyhood were drawn up in proud array under the cottonwoods as they watched Jeb Perrigan and the girl beside him join up with the Oregon-bound caravan out on the prairie.

And the Deacon was happy too.

Before the sun had finished its course toward the western horizon, by the Grace of God and his authority as an ordained minister of the gospel, Deacon Booneway knew he would be conducting a wedding ceremony on the Oregon Trail. . . .

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